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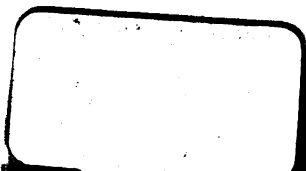
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Dick's Heels Dangled Within a Foot of Tige's Jaws.

Frontispiece.—G. S. B. in the Woods.

The Grammar School Boys in the Woods

OR

Dick & Co. Trail Fun and
Knowledge

By

H. IRVING HANCOCK

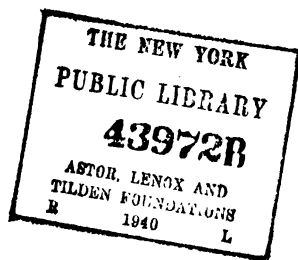
Author of The Grammar School Boys of Gridley, The Grammar School
Boys Snowbound, The Grammar School Boys in Summer Athletics,
The High School Boys' Series, The West Point Series, The
Annapolis Series, The Young Engineers' Series,
The Motor Boat Club Series, Etc.

Illustrated

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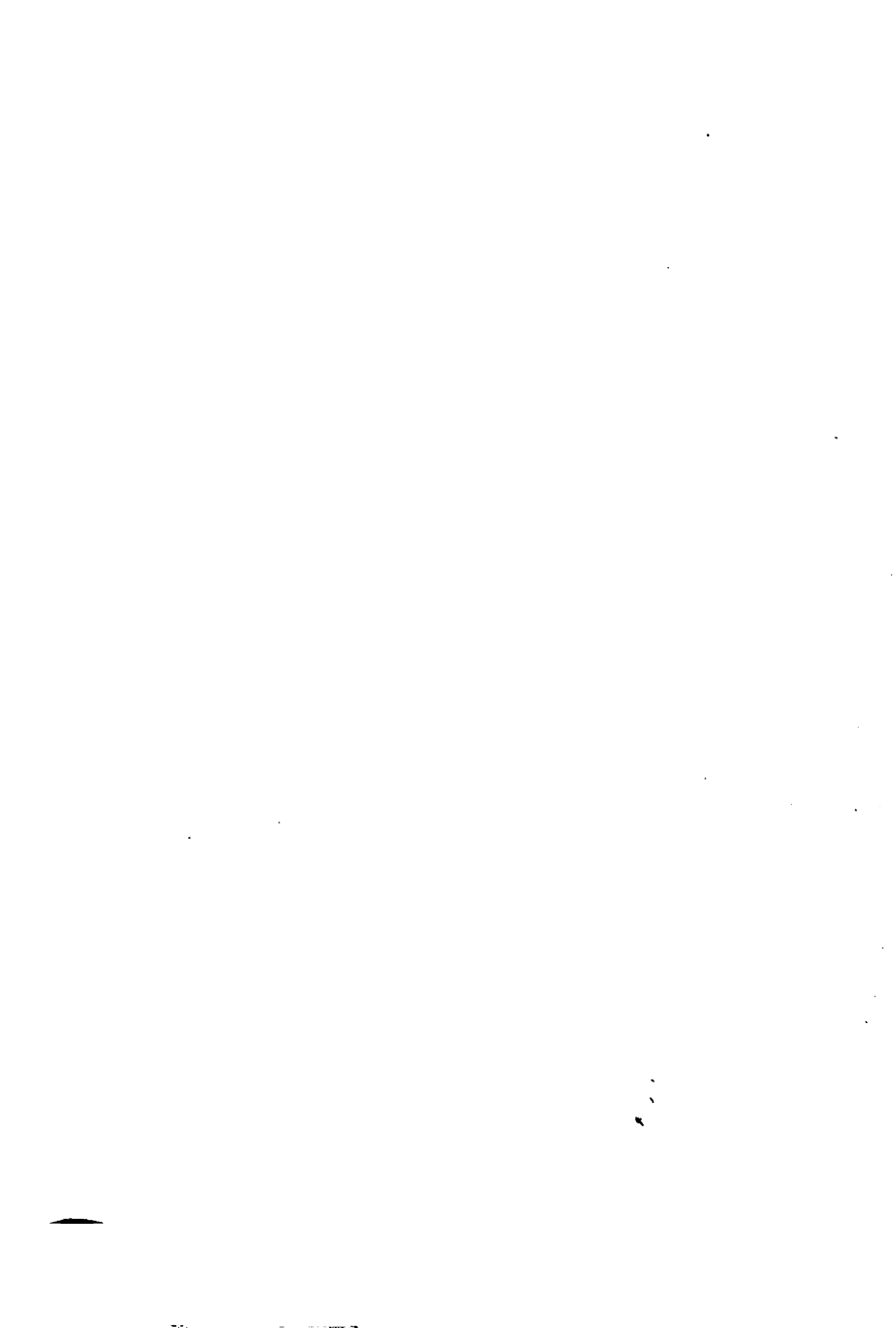


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The Grammar School Boys in the Woods

CHAPTER I

THE STRANGERS OF NORTON'S WOODS

“**A**NY more questions?” inquired Principal E. Dutton Jones, more familiarly known to the students of the Central Grammar School as “Old Dut.”

He stood before the boy and girl pupils of the eighth grade. For twenty minutes he had been talking on the matter of physical geography. This afternoon the subject had been the movements of the sun and moon with reference to the earth.

On the desk before the principal stood an apparatus that he was never tired of exhibiting, but which often bored the Grammar School boys and girls. At the center of this apparatus was a gilded ball representing the sun—stationary. Revolving in an orbit beyond the

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"sun" was another sphere that stood for the earth. On still another orbit was a very small silvered ball intended to represent the moon. By turning a crank Old Dut was able to explain the "mysteries" of the earth's revolution on its axis and the yearly course around the sun and of the moon's phases as seen from the earth.

"Any more questions?" repeated Old Dut after a moment's silence.

No questions were offered.

"Any boy or girl who feels that he does not fully understand all that I have been explaining in this lesson will rise," directed the principal.

No one stirred.

"Then I congratulate you all," said Old Dut dryly, "upon your excellent powers of comprehension. I trust that your memories will prove to be of an equally fine grade—when examination day comes around."

The suspicion of a smile traveled around the room, but this the excellent principal did not appear to see, for he was now busy dismembering the apparatus and replacing it in the wooden case in which the sun-moon-and-earth apparatus usually lay when not in actual use.

"Masters Prescott and Hazelton will please return this box to the storeroom off the exhi-

bition hall, then lock the door and return this key to me," directed Old Dut.

Dick Prescott and Harry Hazelton stepped willingly forward, received the key, then grappled with the box, taking it out of the room.

"Master Alvord?"

"May I leave the room, sir?" replied Ben Alvord, lowering the right hand that he had been holding aloft.

"Yes. Master Allen, is yours a similar request?"

"Yes, sir," Ned Allen admitted.

"Granted, then."

After these two boys had stepped from the schoolroom the wonted quiet, with its accompanying busy-bee air, settled down over the scene. All eyes in the room were now turned on the pages of text-books in grammar.

Dick and Harry had soon finished their errand. As they reached the bottom of the stairs leading to the exhibition hall overhead, they were confronted by Ben and Ned.

"Say, what do you think of Old Dut?" demanded Ben angrily.

"As a teacher?" smiled Dick. "First class."

"He knows his business," supplemented Hazelton.

"Oh, of course he does, as far as teaching goes," retorted Ben. "If he didn't, I don't

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suppose he could hold his job. But what do you think of his putting such a slew of us on the demerit list?"

"Do you mean for what happened when school began?" Dick went on.

"Yes; of course, this afternoon, when Hazelton, there, got a whole raft of us into trouble by starting to toss that glass alley around the room."

"Well, it was a breach of regulations, wasn't it?" propounded Dick.

"Yes; maybe. But you needn't be so virtuous over it, Prescott. You were in it, too."

"And therefore I expect to have to take my medicine," Dick answered.

"But, say, that's tyranny," growled Ben. "It wasn't any crime that we fellows committed."

"Old Dut didn't say it was, either," Prescott went on easily. "But what ails you, Ben? Aren't you willing to stand up and take punishment like a man?"

"Not for a little thing like catching a glass alley when it comes my way," Ben growled.

"I don't see where the harm was in doing a thing like that," added Ned Allen sourly.

"Oh, well, then," laughed Dick, "your course is easy."

"How?"

"When we're kept in after school to-day——"

"And on such a day!" interposed Ben, gazing gloomily out through an open window near by. "The real day of the week for playing marbles, spinning tops or starting in at baseball!"

As though to confirm this statement, a warm, end-of-April breeze came in gently through the open window, followed by a joyous burst from two or three song birds in the trees outside.

"Oh, well, it's all in the day's work," sighed Dick. "We'll just act like men and make the most and best of what's probably coming to us."

"We'll be kept in late this afternoon," snarled Ned Allen.

"This afternoon?" repeated Ben angrily. "We'll be kept in every afternoon for the rest of the week, just for catching Hazelton's old glass alley!"

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" demanded Dick rather impatiently.

"If you've got spirit enough we can all get out of it," Ben went on coaxingly.

"How?" young Prescott asked.

"Why, if we put our heads together for a minute or two, now, we can frame up a yarn——"

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"A *lie*, do you mean!" asked Dick quickly, a slight frown gathering over his eyes.

"No; I wouldn't call it that," Ben argued. "We'll just call it a yarn—a clever yarn. One of the kind that'll wash with Old Dut; something that'll make him see the incident in a different light, and make him easier with us. Perhaps we can get out of it with only ten minutes after school; and just for this afternoon alone."

"If you can get up a yarn that will accomplish all that," agreed Dick heartily, "and if, at the same time, the yarn has no shade of a lie about it, then I'm with you. Hurry up with the yarn; let's hear it."

"Oh, of course, the yarn will have to stretch the truth a little, you simpleton," urged Ben.

"Then it will be a lie?"

"Why, yes; something in that line, if you want to be so particular about it. Now, see here, if you'll all back me up, and swear to it—hands on your hearts—I'll get up, after school, and tell Old Dut——"

"Harry, you tell him what we think of a scheme like that," directed young Prescott.

"We don't want anything to do with your scheme," Hazelton declared. "We've got nerve enough to take our medicine when we get caught right in the act."

"Say, why don't you two get over being weak-kneed?" demanded Ben, more angrily than before. "Why don't you show just a little bit of spirit?"

"So the fellow who tries to lie his way out of a scrape is your idea of a spirited man, is he, Ben?" asked Dick quietly, but with an intense, direct gaze into Ben's shifty eyes that made that youth flush.

"You mean-spirited goody-goody!" gasped Ben.

"You two white-livered sneaks!" sneered Ned Allen in what he meant to be an impressive tone of rebuke.

"You're sneaks! You're the kind of fellows that would tittle-tattle!" flared Ben Alvord, stepping directly in Dick's way.

"You know better!" retorted young Prescott quickly, his fists half doubling. "And I haven't any more time to spend here with you. Get out of my way!"

"Make me, then!" dared Ben.

"Certainly—if you insist on it," Dick answered, still more quietly. Ben hadn't supposed that such a mean-spirited fellow would dare hit him in a school corridor, but something in Dick's eyes told him at once that he had committed an error of judgment. Ben therefore swiftly stepped aside.

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By the time that Dick and Harry had walked around into the bend at the foot of the stairs, and gained the straight corridor that ran down past the classroom doors, Old Dut wasn't in sight.

Yet the school principal had been there, just out of sight of the boys a moment before. He had vanished in the nick of time, making no noise in his felt-soled slippers.

So Dick and Harry returned promptly to the classroom. Two or three minutes later Ben and Ned returned, taking their seats and sullenly picking up the text-books that they were supposed to study.

The little incident of tossing the glass alley, which had happened just after the beginning of the afternoon session, had been nothing very serious in itself.

Harry Hazelton, often given to mischief, had taken a glass alley from one of his pockets and had tossed it across the aisle to Dan Dalzell. Dan had tossed it on to Spoff Henderson, who had adroitly caught it. Then it traveled from hand to hand, up and down aisles and across aisles. Each boy to whom it was sent had caught the little alley adroitly, and a stealthy but highly interesting game of catch was in progress.

All this time Principal Jones had been at-

tentively reading one of the reference books with which his desk was supplied. The boys began to wonder how long they could continue their amusing game without being caught at it.

"Old Dut never sleeps long, and these fellows will get themselves into trouble," thought Dick Prescott.

The marble had just passed to Ned Allen, who, in turn, slyly tossed it to Ben Alvord.

"I'll get that alley and slip it into my pocket," thought Dick. "That will save a lot of fellows from getting into a fool scrape."

So Dick quietly signaled to Ben. The latter took careful aim and tossed it. Dick deftly caught the little, round piece of glass and was in the act of slipping it into one of his trousers' pockets when Old Dut's voice rasped out:

"Master Prescott!"

"Yes, sir."

"Stand up."

Dick rose and stood by his desk.

"What were you doing just now, Master Prescott?"

"I caught a glass alley, sir."

"Who tossed it to you?"

"Please don't ask me that, sir. I'm the one at fault. I asked him to throw it to me."

"Did you also break the rules by whispering, then, Master Prescott?"

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"No, sir. I signaled the other boy."

"That other boy will stand also," commanded Old Dut.

For a moment or two Ben Alvord hesitated. But several other boys were gazing at Ben covertly yet so steadily that the youngster flushed at the supicion that they thought him a cowardly sneak. So Ben rose.

"You tossed the marble to Master Prescott, did you?" demanded Old Dut.

"Y-y-yes, sir."

"The boy who tossed it to Master Alvord will now rise."

Ned Allen hated to do it, but he felt that he'd be found out, even if he "sneaked it," so he rose sullenly by his desk.

"And now the boy who tossed the marble to Master Allen will rise," ordered the relentless principal. One after another boys rose, until the trail had traveled down to Harry Hazelton.

"The boy who tossed that marble, otherwise known as a glass alley, to Master Hazelton, will rise," continued Old Dut.

"May I speak, sir?" inquired Harry.

"Yes."

"No one threw the alley to me, sir. It was mine. I started the game."

"So you looked upon it as a game, Master Hazelton?" queried Old Dut. "I have no doubt

that the rest of these young gentlemen also considered it a game. In itself the tossing of a marble about a schoolroom is not a very serious breach of the moral code. But I wonder if any of you young people have ever stopped to consider why schoolroom regulations are necessary. I suppose that the average schoolboy or school-girl imagines that school regulations are intended only as a means by which a teacher may vent his spite and render uncomfortable the young people who are committed to his charge."

As he spoke Old Dut allowed his gaze to travel about the room. But fifty-odd boys and girls were now looking at him very meekly.

"The schoolroom," went on Old Dut, "is a place where young people assemble for one principal purpose. That purpose is study. Every boy and girl in the room has the right to study. Every act of disorder interferes with that right. So every pupil who commits an act of disorder is guilty, not of a breach of the moral code, but of good manners. There are conditions under which good manners approach good morals very closely in importance. These young men now standing by their desks are all convicted, by their own confessions, of a serious breach of good manners. These culprits number eighteen. For any class room containing fifty or more pupils to have eighteen unman-

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nerly ones among them is a serious matter. I shall, therefore, enter the offenders on the demerit list with ten demerits each. After school to-day, and possibly after school on other days of this week, I shall endeavor to persuade the offenders to get back closer to the line in good manners. Be seated. Resume your studies."

"Which means that there's a big time coming," thought Tom Reade ruefully, as he sank into his own seat. "Old Dut doesn't use all that gunpowder to blow a fly off the end of his nose."

The other offenders all thought the way Tom did about it. Outside, the afternoon was warm and perfect. All day the youngsters had been thinking what pleasure they would find in outdoor sports at the end of the school day. And now, for at least eighteen of the oldest boys in school, these plans were sidetracked. It seemed like a mockery that the day outside should be so golden!

At recess, Ben Alvord and Ned Allen circulated among some of the offenders whose names were on the demerit list.

"We can rig up a yarn all right, if only we can be sure that such sneaks as Prescott and Hazelton won't spoil it all," urged Ben.

"Nothing doing here," returned Spoff Henderson, and walked away.

"But it's a shame that a whole lot of us should lose our fun to-day and the other days," protested Ned Allen.

"It's a shame, yes," agreed Wrecker Lane. "But I guess we're all in for it, and we may as well grin as scowl."

"Say, let's try to think up a yarn that will pass," pleaded Ben. "And we might even rig it so as to give Dick and Harry the worst of it."

"I don't believe I care about going into your idea," replied Wrecker a bit icily.

"Are you a sneak, too?" half sneered Ben.

"No; but Dick was giving it to some of us pretty straight the other day," continued Wrecker. "He said a fellow is a pretty big coward who does something, and then hasn't manhood enough to stand up and take the consequences."

"Pooh! There isn't anything cowardly about standing up for our own rights," argued Ben hotly. "We're just trying to get the best of Old Dut, who can be mighty mean sometimes."

"I guess I'd rather stand up and be counted with Dick Prescott than with Ben Alvord," decided Wrecker, walking away.

"It's too bad we got caught at our fun, but I'm not yellow dog enough to sneak away when I'm fairly caught," said Toby Ross, when approached by Ben and Ned.

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"What on earth has got into the Central Grammar fellows?" demanded Ned, in disgust. "They don't seem to have a bit of spunk."

"It's a good deal Dick Prescott's fault, I guess," complained Ben. "He's been talking a lot about being manly, yet he's just the kind of a fellow to lie down and lick a teacher's hand."

Recall bell rang before Ben and Ned had been able to find any converts to their way of thinking.

"What's going to happen to us after school?" was a question uppermost in the minds of eighteen of the boys during the rest of the afternoon. "How much fun, in this fine weather, are we going to lose?"

With every soft breeze that came in through the windows, and every bird's note calling to these restless, fun-loving youngsters, the question was more serious than an outsider can possibly understand.

"I wouldn't call Old Dut a crank, as some of the fellows do," Dick thought to himself. "I believe he does his very best to be just and fair. But it surely does seem terrible to be kept in, to-day, so late that there's only about time left to get home to supper."

Clang! Following the sound of the bell came Old Dut's command:

"Attention!"

Hands were folded on desk-tops. Many a boyish heart fluttered. These young Americans were not to be long, now, in discovering their fate.

"Without any desire to be thought too lenient," began Principal Jones, "and without any intention of encouraging laxity in school discipline, I am going to allow all but two of the young men on to-day's demerit list to go when the rest of the class is dismissed."

A flutter of joy pervaded the boys' side of the room. Then came, swiftly a half gloom. Who were to be the two luckless ones?

"Something happened this afternoon," continued Old Dut, "that pleased me greatly, and made me very proud of some of my boys. Two other boys approached two manly, honest, decent boys, and tried to interest them in framing a lying version of the marble-tossing incident. The two decent boys flatly refused to escape through the means of any lie. The two decent boys have won my respect. I am glad to be able to think that most of the other boys on the demerit list would have acted just as decently and honorably had they been approached by the two tempters. Therefore, to celebrate the honesty and decency that have come to my knowledge, I am going to dismiss the entire class this afternoon, with the sole exceptions of the

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two boys who tried to tempt decent comrades into lying and sneaking out of a scrape. I will ask the two dishonest ones to remain."

Old Dut paused for a moment, to run a finger along the lines of electric buttons that would transmit the dismissal signal to the other rooms.

"Class rise. March!"

Ben and Ned looked stealthily at each other, then rose with the rest.

Barely had he uttered the word "march" than Old Dut added:

"The two boys who tried to tempt other boys into lying will resume their seats. If they attempt to leave the room they will come back in far quicker time than they tried to leave!"

Turning crimson, then white, Ben and Ned slunk, abashed, back to their seats. As the boys and girls in the coatrooms at opposite sides of the classroom peered back, they knew who the sneaks were.

As for Ben and Ned, under all those curious glances, they would have been heartily glad had a trap door opened to let them through.

"No loitering in the coatrooms!" called the principal. "Monitors on both sides will see that all pass out in orderly fashion."

So the Central Grammar emptied itself of its pupils, all save the luckless few in different rooms who tarried because of demerits.

"Say, who were the fellows whose conduct got us off?" demanded Wrecker Lane of one of the groups that paused, for a moment, beyond the schoolyard gates. "Does anybody know?"

If anyone did at least no one answered. Dick & Co., a solid six, were already well down the street, racing away from school. For they had plans of their own, plans with which a long stay after school would have sadly interfered.

"Which way shall we go?" called Greg Holmes.

"My vote," Dick called out, as the six slowed down to a rapid walk, "is for Norton's woods. You know the big, very level field just beyond. It isn't boggy, there, either. Good, dry ground."

"Just the place," nodded Dave Darrin.

"There couldn't be a better for our purpose," agreed Dan Dalzell.

What was that purpose?

Readers of the two preceding volumes of this series are well acquainted with the six bright youngsters who made up the schoolboy sextette, famous in Gridley, as Dick & Co.

When introduced to the reader in the first volume, "THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL BOYS OF GRIDLEY," the average age of these chums was thirteen. They were in the eighth, or highest grade of the Central Grammar School, all more or

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less diligently engaged in getting a common school education under the skilled direction of Old Dut. Our reader is familiar with all the rousing adventures and odd or humorous happenings related in that volume. The reader also remembers how the boys came to take part in the affairs of Mr. and Mrs. Dexter, and how the latter, in gratitude, sent them Christmas presents of ten dollars each, and how her attorney, Lawyer Ripley, allowed them the use of a log cabin camp that Mrs. Dexter had inherited. The startling midwinter adventures at that camp form the greater part of the narrative told in the second volume, which is entitled "THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL BOYS SNOWBOUND." The events of that joyous time in camp were such as seldom come into a schoolboy's life.

It was in the latter part of April that the events began which are now to be described. From thirteen the chums had passed their fourteenth birthdays. Actually, they felt several years older; such is the effect of lively adventure in maturing the active boy.

Now we find them headed for Norton's woods. For what purpose? It might sound too strenuous to inactive boys, who spend too much of the best part of the year indoors. But Dick Prescott and his chums were wholly strenuous. That describes the kind of life to which they turned

eagerly. In a word, then, the boys were headed toward Norton's woods for the sole purpose of having some practice in running.

"Some folks would think us foolish," grinned Tom, as the six hastened along in a group. "We could get a lot of practice by running to and from school, and running along some of the back streets."

"Yes," agreed Dick. "But in that case we'd simply run. We couldn't really train on the streets without attracting too much notice to ourselves."

"And a lot of nonsense from small boys," added Greg Holmes.

"To say nothing of the way that some of the High School boys would torment us," suggested Dave Darrin.

"The High School boys have an athletic field, all fenced in," Dick went on. "They can train and practice all they want, and no one can get into their field without the permission of the High School crowd. It is a whole lot different with us. We haven't any field, and when we want one we must go to some place where no one else goes."

"If Fred Ripley and his crew knew where we were going, and for what purpose, there'd be a big enough and mean enough crowd to spoil all our fun," grumbled Dan Dalzell.

"Then we'd better not tell any of our friends at the Central Grammar, even, what we are doing," suggested Dick. "When we go out afternoons for exercise and we don't want to have to spoil our fun by fighting. We'd either have to fight or slip away if Ripley and his crew got after us."

Many of the boys who had left school that afternoon had first started home with a pile of books. Dick and his chums didn't have to take any books home for evening study. All six of these youngsters belonged to the advanced division of the eighth grade. In the midwinter examinations all had passed the final Grammar School examinations, and were entitled to their diplomas. For the remainder of the school year they attended school only that they might ground themselves still better in the Grammar School studies.

"Ready for another run?" called Dick, turning to his chums.

"Yes; but suppose we save our energies somewhat?" proposed Dave. "Let's not sprint. Let's just jog. Then, when we reach the field we'll need only a couple minutes' rest before we do some of the fast work."

"Dog-trot, then," called young Prescott, setting the pace.

At this easy road gait the six went on. Even

a dog-trot, if kept up long, would weary many boys of their age. Dick & Co., however, had now been running for months, at odd times. So, at their easy pace, they continued along the little traveled road until, rounding a bend in the road, they came to the edge of Norton's woods.

"Let's jog right through the woods, not stopping until we reach the edge of the field," Dick called back.

"Right-o!" came the assent.

On they went in silence, after that. Their feet made little noise and they were soon deep in the woods, Dick leading the way along a natural path between trees and through batches of thicket. No boy spoke, for each one was saving his wind.

At last Dick parted the leaves where two lines of thicket met, and bounded into a small open space behind. Dave followed at his heels with Tom Reade a close third.

In an instant the leaders halted, for they were met by a hoarse growl, and then this challenge in a deep voice:

"Now, what are you youngsters meddlin' here for? Get out!"

Two roughly-clad, villainous-looking men had sprung up from the ground, where they had evidently been busily engaged. A bull-dog with an ugly-looking fighting muzzle, his cropped ears

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straight up and his eyes gleaming, stood as though ready to spring at the intruders.

From their appearance the men had been interrupted in something they were doing. They looked more than annoyed—guiltily uneasy.

“Get out! Clear out! Vamoose!” insisted the spokesman of the strange pair.

“Do you own these woods, sir?” Dick inquired pleasantly.

“Do I——” sputtered the fellow, and stopped, choking with anger. Next he bellowed:

“You youngsters get out of these woods, or mighty soon it will be too late for you to start!”

CHAPTER II

BERT DODGE LEARNS A NEW ONE

EVEN had it not been for their savage dog ally these two heavily built men of thirty, or thereabouts, looked capable of having things all their own way in any scuffle with the light-weight boys of Dick & Co. Yet it was the bristling manner of the ugly-looking bull-dog that made the boys most uneasy.

"These gentlemen are quite right," drawled Tom Reade, in his easy-going way. "They know what they want here, and we don't. Moreover, it doesn't appear to be any of our business. Besides, they have all the rights of the first-comers. I move that it be the sense of this meeting that we tender our apologies for the intrusion. As soon as our apologies are accepted I move that we march off by left oblique."

"Apologies?" repeated Dave Darrin, his eyes flashing. "What do we apologize for?"

"That's a question that we can argue later," laughed Dick. "These gentlemen don't want us here, so we'll step back and go where there's no objection to our presence."

"Let's go straight on, instead," objected Darrin. "These fellows don't want us here, and we

haven't any reason to want their society, either. So we'll keep straight on and leave them behind."

"Will you?" demanded the spokesman of the pair, harshly. "Now, listen to me, younkers. You'll turn back and get out of here altogether. If you don't start in the time that it would take me to count five, then you probably won't see your homes to-night."

By this time the bull-dog looked so much like instant attack that the second man of the pair had dropped to one knee, holding to the dog's collar with both hands.

"Our apologies, gentlemen, and we bid you good-bye," said Dick pleasantly, though wrath was rising inside of him. "Come along, fellows—back over the trail."

That there might be no argument with so hot-headed a fellow as Dave Darrin, Dick wheeled at once and started. Tom Reade, usually the peace-maker, followed promptly. Harry, Dan and Greg wheeled into their places in single file. Thereupon Dave's good sense came to his rescue. He swallowed hard, then turned and stalked off after his comrades.

"Now, what can those fellows be up to?" inquired Tom, after the chums had trudged in silence for some moments.

"At a guess," hinted Dick, "they're engaged

in doing something that they don't want other folks to see."

"I could have told you that," retorted Tom. "But just what was it that they were doing, or had been doing?"

"It would be almost foolish to waste any time in guessing," Dick replied.

"We can have a look-in there, later on," proposed Darrin, "and perhaps we may find out."

"Could we find the spot again?" inquired Dan.

"Yes, easily," Dick nodded.

"It looks like a good place to keep away from," Harry urged.

"When those fellows are there," added Tom.

Dick now turned sharply to the right.

"Where are you headed?" Greg asked.

"For the field beyond; where we were headed in the first place," Prescott answered.

"But aren't we likely to run into those chaps again?"

"I don't know," Dick answered. "But at all events we started for the field, and that's where we're going. Judging from their clothes, those two men can't own the whole of the county. We humored them in getting away from their particular spot, but that's going almost far enough in being obliging."

"Yes; even for two men who are chums with a fighting bull-dog," Tom agreed dryly.

Moving swiftly in this roundabout course, Prescott soon led his chums into the open.

"Produce that tape, Dave," called Dick, tossing off coat, vest and hat. The other boys followed the example, while Dave brought to light a fifty-foot tape on a spring reel.

"A hundred yards is far enough for this afternoon's work, isn't it?" Prescott inquired.

"Yes," agreed Dave. "It's the hundred-yard sprint that we've been most poorly at."

"A hundred yards are three hundred feet," Dick continued, digging the toe of one boot into the soil and thus establishing a line. "Give me the end of your tape, Dave, and unreel."

Dave walked ahead, letting out the tape as he went. "Fifty feet," he called presently.

"Dan, go and stand just where Dave is now standing," Dick directed. "Dave, reel in. Now give Dan the home end of the tape and walk off fifty more feet."

Dick remained where he had first stood. Dave walked ahead. Whenever he got out of line with Dan, in a straight line from Dick at the base, Prescott called out, "A little to the right" or "A bit more to the left."

Thus a reasonably straight line was run off for three hundred feet, the other boys being used as markers and preserving the straightness of the line. It was crude surveying, at best, but

it gave a pretty straight line. Now, with a stick and a handkerchief at each end of the hundred-yard line, the course was made clear.

Tom produced a stop-watch, one that he had borrowed from a friend.

"Let's make the most of our time, fellows," Dick called briskly. "Who'll run first?"

Dave offered to do so.

"On your mark, then!" ordered Prescott, while Tom stood by to release the spring of the watch. "Go!" called the young leader. Darrin made his spring, and Tom pressed the stem of the stop-watch at the same instant. At the hundred-yard line stood Reade, ready to register the time record.

Like a deer sped Darrin. He was naturally the best runner of the lot, though Prescott, by sheer training, had succeeded in getting and keeping the lead so far.

Husbanding his wind, Dave shot across the finish line. Reade called out the time to Dick, who entered it in a notebook.

"Two-fifths of a second better than your last sprint, Dave," Dick called.

"I thought it beat what I had been doing before," Dave answered, panting somewhat.

Greg made the next run. He appeared to be moving fast, though he was four-fifths of a second behind Dave's best time.

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There is no need to state any of the records here. Of course not one of the lads got anywhere near the time in which professional runners make the hundred-yard dash. But every one of the chums had improved wonderfully since first taking up running.

"What's the need of all this sprinting, anyway?" demanded Dan. "The cross-country jog is a lot more fun than using up all the breath a fellow has in trying to beat a locomotive for a few seconds."

"When we get in the High School next fall you'd like to make the football team, wouldn't you?" Dick queried.

"Of course."

"It's in football that the sprint often counts for more than any other playing qualification," Dick returned. "It's the fellow who can break through the line, or dart around the end, and then simply sprint, sprint, sprint, who gets the ball closest to the other side's goal line. With a few other points assured it's the sprinter who rolls up the score for his own side."

"But we won't get on the High School football team this fall," argued Dan. "When did you ever hear of the High School boys admitting a measly freshman to the football squad?"

"That's about true," Dick admitted. "Yet the more we practise sprinting now the better

men we'll be on the gridiron whenever we do reach the squad. For, of course, we all hope to make the High School gridiron squad."

"I'd about as soon not make High School at all as not make the athletic training squads and the teams," Dave Darrin broke in. "What all-around good is a fellow who can't do anything in athletics? Why, when such a dub grows up he's only half a man at best."

"And the other men that he meets in life know that he isn't as much of a man as he ought to be," Tom declared approvingly.

"Oh, that's all right," Dan agreed. "But I can't make myself like this sprinting over much. It gives me a pain in the side when I run like a streak of greased lightning."

"Do you get as much pain in the side as when we first started to train?" Dick inquired.

"Oh, no; of course not."

"Then the more you train—if you train properly—the more that pain will disappear. By and by you won't have any such pain."

"All right, if you're sure of it," Dan answered. "It's my turn to run again, isn't it?"

"Yes. Get on your mark. Go!"

Each youngster did three of the swift dashes in all. Dave and Tom wanted to try more, but Dick, whom they had elected their trainer, forbade any more sprinting.

"We'll start homeward soon," he added, "and we can do some jogs along the road, but no more swift work. Greg, you'd better get up off the ground. Remember, you're heated."

"We might as well start home now, then," proposed Greg, rising from the grass.

"Don't you fellows think we'd all better rest a few minutes, until we've got our normal wind back?" Dick asked mildly.

"All right," agreed several of the chums.

Out of the woods, just then, came a sneering hail:

"Say, look who's here!"

"It's Bert Dodge and some more fellows," muttered Dave disgustedly.

"Then I guess Fred Ripley is not far behind," said Dick. "It's a pity we have to run into that crowd so often."

"We might as well be moving along," hinted Harry Hazelton.

"Don't you believe it!" retorted Tom. "That crowd would be only too glad to think that they had chased us away."

"No, we won't go just yet," decided Dick. "We've as much right here as those fellows have. How many are there? Seven, and Ripley's not with them this time. If we have to do so, we'll make a fight for our right to stay here and not be molested."

"What are you kids doing?" hailed Dodge in a disagreeable tone, as he came along rapidly at the head of his crowd. Two of the fellows behind Dodge were High School boys of low grade, while the rest were sixteen or seventeen-year-old loungers, who, in their own opinions, were too old to go to school and too young to go to work. Dodge's father was an officer in one of the local banks, but Bert was sometimes found in poorer company than his parents expected him to cultivate.

"I asked you a question, and I want it answered," announced Bert, stepping aggressively up to young Prescott. "What are you kids doing here?"

Dick stiffened, throwing his shoulders back and gazing contemptuously into Bert's eyes.

"We're mining," young Prescott answered.

"And making money at it, too," grimaced Tom Reade.

"Mining?" repeated Dodge. "What on earth are you mining?"

"Our own business," Dick retorted. "If you want to try a hand at it, there's plenty of room at the other side of the field."

"See here, don't you get too gay with me, or I'll set back the hands on your clock!" warned Bert, stepping close to Dick and clenching his fists.

Dick didn't move, but gazed back steadily into the bully's eyes.

"There's a lot of freshness in the air," Dick went on, "but very little of it came from our crowd."

"Do you mean to say that it came from my crowd?" demanded Bert jeeringly.

"No; your crowd is all right, up to the present moment. But your friends ought to take you over to the nearest brook and duck you."

"I'll take that impudence out of your face!" cried Bert, flushing angrily. He stepped up to Prescott, meaning to hit him this time.

"Don't hit the kid, Bert," called one of the other High School boys good-naturedly. "He doesn't know any better. He's only a kid who is trying to talk like a man."

"I'll teach him where to spread his 'sass,'" retorted Dodge, raising his right fist.

He held the fist poised for an instant, prepared to enjoy the sight of the Grammar School boy flinching. But Dick merely smiled steadily, though his face was white with wrath.

Then Bert suddenly launched his fist forward. Dick ducked and took a swift step forward.

"Ouch!" yelled Bert, doubling up. "Oh, you little fiend!"

"All I want of you is to have you let me alone," Dick retorted, springing back. "I

think you'll do it, too, for a few minutes, anyway. I'm sorry if I've hurt you much, but I'm not going to let you play the bully with me every time we meet."

Bert had sunk to the ground, where, with an expression of acute misery on his rather handsome face, he was holding tenderly to his right foot.

The Grammar School boy had sprung a wholly new line of defense on the bully. Just as Bert launched the blow Dick had crouched and darted in, stamping one foot, with all his force, across the toes of Dodge's right foot.

As a consequence, all the power to fight was gone from young Dodge at this moment. Bert felt too crippled even to think of standing up at present.

"Some of you fellows jump in and box that Prescott kid's ears for him!" wailed Bert, who, still on the ground, was gritting his teeth and yet was unable wholly to keep the tears from the corners of his eyes.

One or two of Bert's companions stepped forward, though the others remained still in their tracks.

"Sail in! Trounce the whole lot of little freshies!" commanded Bert.

"Look out, all of you!" warned Dave Darrin, bounding to Dick's side. "We have a few more

new tricks. If you get us started some of you will eat your suppers in bed if you eat at all!"

Dick's chums had closed in around their leader, presenting a united and hostile front.

"You can just as well have some such trimmings as Dodge has won," Dave continued defiantly.

Dick used one elbow to nudge Darrin into silence, before he went on coolly:

"You're bigger fellows than we are, and we know it. But we have the same rights in this field that you have. We didn't attempt to bother you, and none of you have any right to trouble us. If you start anything we're going to fight back for our plain rights. We'll probably get most of the hurts, but none of you fellows will get away, either, without something to remember us by. Now, will you mind your own business and let us do the same?"

"See here, you fellows," cried Bert hoarsely, getting painfully on to his feet, "we're not going to let the town laugh at us for being terrified by a lot of little Grammar School kids. Sail in and spank 'em all. Then chase 'em home. I'll give you all the help I can. Line up and 'swat' these little mosquitoes!"

Thus taunted, Bert's crew came forward, doubling their fists. Matters looked badly for Dick & Co.

CHAPTER III

TOM SIGHS FOR A FIVE-INCH CANNON

“REMEMBER, boys,” counseled Dick’s steady though cold and quiet voice, “that we’re smaller and that we’ve got to make all of our first work tell. With a mean crew like this, hurt ’em any way you can.”

To see the six small Grammar School boys hold their own so unflinchingly came as a second surprise to these larger youths.

Then suddenly one of the High School boys, Ed Briggs, called out:

“Hold on, fellows!”

“Hold nothing!” blazed Bert angrily. “Walk in! Spank ’em!”

“But the sides are too uneven,” retorted Ed Briggs. “There won’t be anything fair about tackling such little fellows.”

While Ed was talking, the rest of Dodge’s crew had hesitated momentarily.

“If you’re afraid of such small fry, Ed,” jeered Bert, “step out to one side.”

“I’m not afraid of small fry, or big, either, and you know it, Dodge,” retorted Briggs, his face flushing. “I’m going to even up matters by fighting on the other side.”

At that, with a sudden move, Briggs bounded across, stationing himself on the left flank of Dick & Co.

"Now, I guess sides are more even, and it will be a fairer fight," grinned Ed.

"You sneak!" hissed Dodge, his face turning livid.

"I'll fight you for that lie, Dodge," retorted Briggs, his face again flushing. "I'll fight you just as soon as you recover from the Grammar School foot that you're wearing."

"Oh, this whole business is a joke," declared another of Dodge's crew. "Bert, if you want to have any trouble with Prescott, go ahead and have it at your own convenience. Don't try to drag us into something that we'd have to be ashamed of for many a day to come. I wouldn't be surprised, Bert, if little Prescott agrees to fight you any time that you want."

"Yes, I will," spoke up Dick quickly. "I don't want to fight, but I'd sooner do it than have to look out for trouble every time this mean-spirited High School bully comes around where I am."

"What's that?" choked Bert, his face blazing with anger. "You dare to call me names? Oh, you—you—miserable mucker!"

"I'm willing to leave it to any jury," Dick retorted, "which one of us acts more like the

mucker. You can pick your jury from the Grammar School or the High School, just as you please, Dodge. I guess the trouble with you is that you've yet to learn that, though your father is a respected man in this town, that fact doesn't necessarily make you respectable."

"You haven't told us yet, Bert," laughed Ed Briggs tormentingly, "whether you want to fight Prescott as soon as your lame foot will let you."

"I won't make any engagement to fight him," retorted Bert explosively. "He's beneath my notice as far as fighting goes. But I'll reserve the right to wallop him at any time that I may meet him and feel like it."

"Then I guess the fight is listed to come pretty soon," laughed Dick softly. "Since you won't let me alone, Dodge, you'll find me ready for you at any time that pleases you best."

"Oh, come along, fellows; I'm not going to listen to the crowing of this little bantam," raged Bert, turning his back and starting away.

However, only one of his late companions went with him. The rest remained.

"I used to think Dodge was a pretty good fellow, but I'm about through with him," remarked one of the late deserters.

"I'm through with him for good," nodded

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Ed Briggs. "I don't get down on a fellow too easily, but I believe that Dodge is white-livered as well as mean. Let's go along and leave these Grammar School kids to themselves. They may be small, but they're full of grit. They've got some rights, anyway, when they mind their own business as well as they did to-day."

"Much obliged to you for your willingness to help us, Briggs!" Dick called out politely as the rest of the larger boys started away.

"I didn't really offer to help you," Ed Briggs answered. "All I wanted was to see the two sides better evened up if there were going to be a fight."

"I never thought much of Briggs before, but he certainly did show up on the decent list to-day," remarked Tom.

"Oh, it's a pretty low-down fellow of any age, kid or grown-up, who'll stand by and see a lot of big fellows wallop a lot of smaller ones," Greg put in.

"We'd better be making a start for home, if we want to get there in time for supper," proposed Dick. "Let's get through to the road and then we can try ourselves on another jog trot."

Their course led them again into Norton's woods. With the excitement of the most re-

cent events in their minds, none of the boys, at first, remembered their meeting with the ugly strangers and the bulldog.

"Say," announced Tom at last, "aren't we getting just a bit close to where we met the men who were so ticklish about their rights to privacy?"

"'Privacy' is a pretty big word. What does it mean?" mocked Dan.

"Oh, those men have probably gone long ago," Dick replied. "If we do happen to meet them we can get out of their way, just as we did before."

"Gr-r-r-r!" sounded a canine voice right in their path a few moments later.

"Now, doggy, what are you getting asthma about?" demanded Tom, halting, the gooseflesh creeping over him at sight of the dog's two rows of sharp teeth.

"Now, what are you younkers doing here again?" demanded a voice, as the two tattered strangers showed themselves through the bushes. "Didn't we tell you to keep away from here? Wasn't once enough?"

"All we want is to pass through, on our way home," Dick declared. "You want us to go away from here, and that's what we are trying to do. Will you be good enough to call off your dog?"

The other of the two men now spoke, calling to the bull-dog. But that dog showed a plain reluctance to moving away from Tom, who now felt that there must be gooseflesh enough all over his body to weigh a ton.

The dog not obeying, the tattered fellow who had ordered the dog away now came and took hold of the animal's collar.

"Come away, Tige!" ordered this man, who was probably the owner of the dog. "Shut up your growling."

In a little while the dog's master had succeeded in dragging him some fifty feet away.

"We'd oughter let the dog chew you younk-ers up a bit," called the man who had done most of the talking.

"I'm glad you're not doing what you'd ought to, then," responded Tom, dryly.

Once freed of the dog's menace, all six of the Grammar School boys had begun to make their way past the point.

"You'd oughter let Tige at 'em," snarled the spokesman of the pair. "Let the dog go. Then these younk-ers will know enough to keep out of the woods for a spell."

The other man said something in an undertone.

"Turn the dog loose, I tell you!" again ordered the spokesman of the pair.

"Great Scott, boys, look out!" yelled Reade suddenly. "The beast is loose!"

As he spoke Tom made a bolt for the nearest tree, seizing the trunk in a panic. All the other boys made for trees at the same moment.

But Tige seemed to center all his thoughts on Reade. As he reached the tree and leaped upward his strong jaws snapped barely a half an inch beneath one of Tom's heels. Had young Reade's nerve been less steady he would have dropped from sheer fright. Instead, the boy took another hitch upward, then soon gained the lowest limb.

"You never touched me!" exulted Tom, eying the frantic brute that was running around the base of the trunk and growling fiercely. "Say, wouldn't you like to get up here? Tige, old boy, the only thing you can do is to gnaw the tree down. They you'll get me."

By this time Dick and his other chums were up as many trees as there were boys. All were perched there, safe from immediate harm.

"When you get ready, men," called Dick, "I take it that you'll drag your pup away and give us a chance to go home to our suppers."

"When we get ready—yes," growled the fellow who had done most of the talking. "But there's no use of your thinking about supper to-night. You aren't going to get any."

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The two men talked in undertones for a moment. Then the dog's master went over to the bull-dog, stroking the animal roughly.

"Watch 'em, Tige," ordered the master. "Don't let any of 'em get away."

"Gr-r-r-r!" promised the brute, wagging his stumpy tail.

"Stay right on the job, Tige," called the other stranger. Again the dog answered, then watched the two men start off out of sight.

"But say!" yelled Dick. "Surely you're not going to force us to stay up these trees away into the night?"

"You'll be lucky, you youngers will, if you get out the trees by late to-morrow night," came back the jeering information.

"That's a mighty mean thing to do to us," Dick remonstrated.

"It's what you get for coming back here and peeping on us, after we'd told you to keep away, younker."

"Won't you please call the dog?" asked Dick coaxingly.

"Don't believe we will," retorted the spokesman.

"Please!" supplemented Tom.

"Just take it as a joke, youngers," grinned the dog's master. "Two or three days and nights up a tree will give you lots of time to

think. But be careful not to fall asleep and roll off your perches. You'll soon find that Tige never sleeps. Neither does he wander away from his job. One fine point about Tige is his disposition to stay right where his work is."

Laughing hoarsely, both men now disappeared into the woods beyond. Dick Prescott, who was up a tree within fifty feet of the one that protected Reade, looked over the scene disgustedly.

"This is about the queerest scrape ever!" snorted Dick.

"Any time you don't like it get down on the ground and walk for exercise," cackled Greg ruefully.

"I wish I had a gun," sighed Dick, eying the bull-dog that wandered restlessly on the ground under the trees.

"A five-inch cannon would express my feelings better," grunted Reade. "I wonder how long we're up here for!"

"Twenty-four hours or more, I guess," sighed Dick.

"Do you believe the men when they tell us that?" asked Dave.

"After a good look at that pair of men," Prescott rejoined, "I'm prepared to believe anything about them and their evil intentions."

CHAPTER IV

THE LEFT-OVER FROM A PICNIC

"IF the dog keeps us here all night I'll miss my sleep mightily," complained Greg.

"You can learn how to sleep on the limb of a tree," grinned Dan Dalzell.

"Yes; and then roll off in my sleep and wake up to find Tige making a late supper on me," shivered young Holmes. "No; I guess not, thank you!"

"First of all," rumbled Tom, "I'm going to miss my supper, and all because I don't want Tige to have his."

The sun had gone down now, and dark would soon be upon them. But every time the boys took a look at Tige the more they felt that the dog would not once be caught napping through the night.

"I've read, somewhere, that a fellow with nerve enough can lay out any dog stiff," spoke up Dave Darrin at last.

"How?" demanded Dick with swift interest.

"Why, when a dog is charging at you, take a stick, a newspaper, even a handkerchief if that's the best you've got. Grip the ends firmly in either hand. Make a quick, menacing motion

at the dog with the object you're holding in your hands——”

“Fine!” broke in Tom with sham enthusiasm. “I’d enjoy being on the ground and threatening Tige with a three-for-a-quarter handkerchief!”

“It doesn’t really make any difference what you hold in your hands, as long as you threaten the dog with it,” Darrin explained. “The dog will always make a spring for the object that you hold. As he does so, swing back one foot and kick him hard in the stomach.”

“But suppose, at that instant, you had a sudden cramp in that leg?” Reade inquired.

“I believe the thing can be done,” insisted Dave.

“No doubt about it, Dave,” Dick agreed. “Come over to this tree and I’ll lend you my handkerchief.”

“Say, it’s going to be cold out here to-night,” muttered Harry Hazelton, turning up his coat collar. “There’s a chilly breeze coming up now.”

“Confound people who will play a low-down trick like this!” quivered Tom indignantly.

“At all events we’re not low down, nor likely to be in a hurry,” laughed Dick. “And this limb I’m perched on is getting so hard that I’m wondering if I can’t find a softer seat somewhere in the tree.”

As Dick spoke he stood up, balancing himself in the crotch of the tree.

"Be mighty careful that you don't take a tumble to the ground," begged Greg Holmes fearfully.

"Whatever turns out to be my loss will be Tige's gain," chuckled Prescott, as he began to move about in the tree.

The bull-dog, noting Prescott's movements, bounded under the tree, looking up expectantly and snarling.

"The beast misses his supper. Look out, Dick," warned Dave.

But suddenly young Prescott uttered a whoop, then threw himself out upon another limb and began working his way along.

"What on earth——" began Tom.

"Fellows"—there was a quiver in Prescott's voice—"I've just discovered that there's a rope tied to the limb that I'm on. It's tied in two places, and looks as if it might have been used by some picnic party as a swing. Then the bottom of the swing was thrown up over the limb."

"I see," cried Dave joyously. "Dick, old chum, that rope is an inspiration."

"No," contended Tom thoughtfully; "it's a chance, and a big one, too."

"A chance for us to escape," nodded Dan.

"No; a mighty big chance that Dick will tumble off, or break the limb, and go crashing down to meet the 'bow-wow.' "

The limb, not any too strong for holding up a weight like Dick's body, began to sag.

"Gr-r-r-r!" remarked Tige, running to the spot where he believed the Grammar School boy would land on the earth.

"Look out, Dick! That limb is going to break under you," cried Greg. "We'd better stay where we are for a couple of days, old fellow, than have anything happen to you. Get back!"

"Thank you," murmured Dick, pausing. "I don't believe I'll go back until I can take the rope with me."

"Then be mighty careful. Don't risk too much on our account," begged Greg Holmes.

Again Dick started to climb out. Tige, in his horrible eagerness, danced on his hind paws, as though he could not wait for his fine human prey to come down to him.

Again the limb bent. In another instant five gasps of horror escaped the Grammar School boys, for Prescott, despite his best care, slipped from the limb.

"Wow-ow! woof!" barked Tige, leaping as high into the air as he could go.

However, Dick Prescott, in going down,

caught frantically at the limb with both hands, and held on, his heels dangling within a foot of Tige's jaws.

Breathless, now, the Grammar School boys watched their leader. They did not offer advice, for there was none to give. Hand over hand Prescott tried to work his way back along the limb. At times he felt as though his muscles would give way, and that he must drop to the ground.

Yet at last Dick managed to reach the trunk once more. Then he pulled himself up into the crotch, shaking.

"Don't try that again," warned Dave Darrin.

"I've got to. I'm hungry," Prescott muttered. "You'd take a dozen chances, Dave, if you were here in my place."

Darrin could not deny that statement. After resting himself, Dick once more crawled out along the limb, moving even more slowly than before. Finally, though his support was bending dangerously close to the ground, and might break at any moment, Prescott laid eager fingers on the rope.

"The knots are old and hard. I'll have to cut the rope," he called out.

With his pocket knife this proved to be an easy task. A minute or two later, Dick, with

the rope in hand, moved slowly back to the crotch.

"Now, we still have to wait and see whether the game will work," announced young Prescott, as he sat securely and began to work at one end of the rope. He made a slip noose, like that at the end of a lariat, testing the strength of his knot very carefully.

"Now we shall see what we may see," he called, almost laughingly, as he balanced himself ready to handle the imitation lariat. "Tige, you abominable villain!"

Then Dick began to imitate growls and barks, making threatening signs at the dog. Tige's bad temper asserted itself and he bounded against the tree trunk, growling savagely.

"Oh, wouldn't you like to get me?" mocked Dick. "Wouldn't you, just! Bow-wow!"

Prescott made a move as though throwing something at the beast, whereat Tige renewed his frantic efforts to leap up into the crotch of the tree.

Making a careful calculation, Dick finally dropped the noose.

"Hurrah!" he yelled, then began to draw the rope upward. For he had dropped the noose neatly down over Tige's head, over the animal's body and now had the noose drawn tightly up under the dog's shoulders.

"You wanted to come up here, but this isn't the way you wanted to come," mocked Prescott. "Now, bull-pup-with-a-bad-disposition, we'll bring you most of the rest of the way up."

Gathering enough of the rope in his hands, Prescott poised himself for an instant, then leaped to the ground. Naturally that move carried Tige several feet more skyward. Yelping, yowling, snarling in impotent rage, Tige now hung just about two feet from the limb over which the rope was fastened.

"Very little more to do in your case, you dentist's exhibit," went on Dick coolly, as he passed his end of the rope around the tree trunk, then knotted it securely.

"That's what I call the employment of brains," announced Tom Reade, slipping down from his own chosen tree and running over.

"Brains would be very little good without the rope," Dick replied. "Fellows, we owe a big debt of gratitude to the picnickers who left their swing here last summer."

All of the Grammar School boys were now on the ground, gathered around their leader. Tige's yelps of rage and defeat were very much like music to their ears. The dog was viciously struggling against his plight, squirming, snapping, barking.

"We'd better travel fast while the walking is good," declared Harry Hazelton. "The brute will gnaw through that rope before long."

"How can he?" retorted Dave. "Dick used brains in making that cast with the noose. The rope passes up back of the dog's head. He's trying to swing himself around so that he can get his teeth on the rope, but he won't manage it in a week."

"Just the same, we'd better not dally here," advised Prescott. "For one thing, the men may come back at any moment. Then we'd be as badly off as before. Besides, that rope has probably hung here all winter, and it may be rather rotten. Come along!"

It was almost dark in the woods, and quite dark on the road by the time the Grammar School boys reached the highway.

"Confound me!" muttered Tom. "I always was too tender hearted. It will be my undoing one of these days."

"What's the matter now?" asked Dave.

"I'm thinking of that poor, miserable dog, dangling in the air, and snarling the skin off his throat," complained Reade. "Harry, you be a decent fellow. We're safe, now, so you go back and untie the dog."

"Does anyone happen to be carrying chloroform in his pocket?" queried Hazelton.

"For the dog?" asked Greg.

"No, for Tom; he's becoming violent again."

"How about that jog we were going to have?" Dick wanted to know. "It will bring supper to us sooner."

The pace was set, nor was it slackened until half a mile had been covered. Followed by a brisk walk, and then by another jog trot, the distance to Gridley was soon covered.

"But we haven't found out what that ugly pair are doing in the woods, that they're so very secret about," declared Dave Darrin. "Since they've shown us more attention than we wanted, I'm going to find out what they are up to in Norton's woods."

"We'll turn over to you all our rights in the matter, and you can go it alone, with our best wishes," retorted Tom Reade, laughing.

"We'll have a lot better time if we mind our own business, I'm thinking," Greg offered.

"Yes; it will be a lot better for us if we don't go prying into other peoples' affairs," Dick nodded.

"But we didn't start this business," urged Dave almost angrily. "The other crowd started it all, and now they deserve to have us meddling."

"We'd better keep away from Norton's woods altogether," Greg went on.

"No," uttered Dick stubbornly. "The only man who has any right to keep us out of those woods is Mr. Norton, and at last accounts he was in Europe. When we want to go to the woods we'll do it; this is a free country. Just the same, I don't believe it will be wise for us to meddle too much in the affairs of the ugly pair. We might get into a good deal worse scrape than we did to-night."

Then the boys separated, hastening home.

"Son, is there any explanation of your coming to supper nearly an hour late?" asked Mr. Prescott, as the young man, his face flushed, stepped into his father's bookstore.

"Yes, sir; of course. When you've heard, perhaps you'll be glad that I'm only an hour late."

"Dick's supper is in the oven, and I can serve it at any moment," called Mrs. Prescott, coming from the back of the store.

First of all Dick explained what had befallen Dick & Co. His father, looking grave, asked for close descriptions of the strangers of Norton's woods. Then Mr. Prescott went to the telephone, calling up the police station. He repeated his son's information, even to the descriptions of the tattered men.

"If such characters are nesting in our woods, chief, it seems to me that it will be well for your

men to root them out, and either lock them up or chase them away," Mr. Prescott finished. Then he turned around to his family.

"The chief agrees with me," Mr. Prescott explained. "He is going to send men up there within the next few minutes."

The following morning the "Blade" contained an account of the adventure of Dick & Co. The newspaper also stated that the police had found the dog, still hanging, and, as the animal was deemed too vicious to handle alive, it had been shot.

Of the two tattered strangers the police had been able to secure no information, but it was added that the authorities would continue on the lookout for such a pair, while citizens generally were asked to send in any information that they might secure.

"If our friends read the papers," Dick remarked to his chums in the schoolyard before the ringing of the gong, "they will learn enough, no doubt, to make them want to get a good distance away from Gridley."

"We can spare them," admitted Tom. "Bert Dodge is likely to give more trouble."

"Dick has the first claim on a fight with Dodge," broke in Dave Darrin eagerly. "But I want to remark, right now, that I claim the second meeting with Dodge."

Tom Reade looked at both of his friends critically before he answered:

"Bert Dodge is a good deal larger than either of you, and has had a lot of practice in boxing. He's of a mean disposition, too and I'm afraid he can wallop either one of you."

"He may have to prove it, anyway," Dave flashed back.

Clang! clang! The gong rang loudly, summoning the boys and girls of Central Grammar School to form in single file in the boys' and girls' basements.

Just as he started for the basement Ben Alvord whispered to Ned Allen, Hen Dutcher and two other boys:

"Of course it was Prescott and Hazelton who went to Old Dut yesterday afternoon and blabbed all about how Ned and I wanted to frame up a yarn to get us out of the glass alley scrape! Who else was there that knew anything about it to tell to Old Dut? Tell me that! Fellows, we've just got to get square with that measly sneak, Prescott.

CHAPTER V

A CHILL AND A WARM-UP

THREE days more slipped quickly by. Every afternoon Dick & Co., after school, went to the field beyond Norton's woods, and there enjoyed their training at running.

Nor did Bert Dodge show up again during those days. Neither were the tattered pair heard from in any way. It was the opinion of Dick & Co. that the two men had left Gridley at last.

All through the week Ben Alvord and Ned Allen were busy among such of the boys at school as would listen to them.

Saturday came, a bright May day, full of promise.

"Is there anything for me to do in the store this morning, dad?" asked Dick, after breakfast.

"Nothing, though of course there may be some books for you to deliver to customers this evening."

"Then I'm off to find the crowd," declared Dick, reaching for his cap. "We can make great use of to-day."

"What are you and your friends going to do?" asked his mother.

"We're going off to the woods, for a tramp and to train," Dick replied. "We're trying to become real runners."

"I am glad of it," nodded Mr. Prescott to his wife after their son had gone. "The outdoor life and the regular physical exercise will be the making of the lad. I only wish that some one had chased me outdoors more when I was Dick's age."

"I do hope the boys won't run into that dangerous pair of men," sighed Mrs. Prescott.

"Probably they won't," replied Mr. Prescott. "Even if they do, there are six of the lads, and not a coward among them. They got away, all right, from the last meeting, didn't they, mother?"

"Yes; but I'm afraid there's bound to come a time when they won't have such good luck."

Ben Alvord and Ned Allen were astir early that forenoon, also. They had a few other boys out with them—boys of the kind who seem to prefer to follow a bad leader.

As he turned the corner into Main Street the first fellow whom Dick met was Hen Dutcher, whom our readers no doubt, well remember.

"Looking for your gang?" hailed Hen.

"I'm looking for my friends," Dick answered.

"Same thing, anyway," Hen nodded. "They're over at Dobbs's wharf. Dave Darrin told me to tell you where they were if I saw you."

"What are they doing over there?" asked Dick, opening his eyes in surprise.

"Dunno; but Darrin told me to say where they all are. It's none of my business what they're doing."

"I guess that's right, too," smiled Dick. "Much obliged to you, Hen."

"Say, let me go on over there with you," begged Hen, stepping alongside.

"I don't believe the fellows will care much about having you there," Prescott answered. "They haven't cared very much about you, Hen, since the way you acted in camp last winter."

"Oh, I ain't going to try to hang out with the crowd," Hen assured the other boy. "I just wanted to walk along and talk with you."

"There's no objection to that that I can see," Prescott admitted. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Oh, anything; nothin' in particular."

Dick walked at a rapid gait, but Hen easily kept up with him. After a few minutes they came in sight of Dobbs's place, which was a large estate on the river bank that was used only in the summer time.

At Dick's first glimpse of the wharf he saw a few boys moving about there.

"I don't see any who look like my chums," Dick remarked.

"Oh, there may be some other fellows there, too," Hen suggested. This sounded altogether probable, as the wharf was a favorite resort for Gridley boys at times when the Dobbs family was away.

When Dick got a little nearer he noted that the boys on the wharf had disappeared. He was still unsuspecting, however, and walked briskly along, Hen at his side. Then both boys passed the boathouse on the shore.

"Here he is, fellows!" shouted a triumphant voice, as several boys leaped out from hiding at the river end of the boathouse. "Now, we've got you—sneak!"

Ben Alvord jumped up and down, dancing in his glee. There were ten boys there, including Hen and not counting Dick.

"What is this—a trick of some kind?" Dick demanded, drawing back. Ten gleeful youngsters stood around him.

"Yes, it's a sorter trick," admitted Ben sneeringly. "We're here, Prescott, to ask you all about the trick you played in going to Old Dut and blabbing about what Ned and I said to you out in the corridor at school."

"But I didn't blab," Dick retorted, flushing.

"Tell that to the babies!" jeered Ben. "If you didn't tell, then who did?"

"I don't know, of course."

"Who but you and Harry Hazelton could have told Old Dut?" demanded Alvord, with the tone and air of a judge.

"I don't know, as I said before," Dick returned, looking Ben steadily in the eyes. "But I know that I didn't tell, and that Harry didn't, either."

"That won't go down with this crowd," Ben informed him. "You're a sneak and a liar, and we fellows intend to show you just what we think of you, Dick Prescott."

"Wait first, Ben Alvord, and let me tell you just what I think of you," Prescott snapped back. "In the first place, you're a coward, or you wouldn't need such a big pack at your back when you want to ask me something. In the next place, you're a liar, for I didn't breathe a word against you to Old Dut. You're a liar, too, because you tried to coax Hazelton and myself into slipping out of punishment through telling Old Dut some lies. If there's any sneak here, Ben Alvord, you're it, every time. I've not only called you a liar and a sneak, but a coward, too. The last remark can be proved very quickly. Take off your coat and face me."

Dick dropped his own coat and cap to the ground.

"Fight! fight!" yelled some of the boys.

"Naw," retorted Ben disdainfully. "I'm not going to soil my hands by hitting such a sneaky, mean-spirited fellow. He's no good, and it's up to us fellows, to show this Prescott sail-trimmer what we think and know about him. Grab him!"

There was a brief scuffle, during which Ben was careful, though making plenty of noise, to keep well in the background. Dick threw into his defense all the speed and energy that he possessed. One boy drew back with a bleeding nose, another with a half-closed eye. Then Prescott was borne down to the ground. Even here he made such good use of his flying feet that two more boys received punishment before they were able at last to hold Dick helpless. After some more struggling Ben's forces succeeded in tying their captive hand and foot. It was a clumsily-performed task, with three times as much cord employed as was needed, but at last the deed was done.

"Bring out the rope," ordered Ben gleefully.

"Now we'll teach the sneak the best lesson he ever had in his life!"

The rope was produced, and a noose made fast around Dick's body.

"Down to the wharf with him!" ordered Ben, and six whooping youngsters seized and bore their prisoner down to the wharf.

"Over with him!" directed Ben. "Keep your mouth shut, Prescott, 'cause maybe the river water isn't any too clean. Souse him!"

Over into the river Dick was unceremoniously bundled. There was a splash as he struck the water, his head disappearing below the surface.

"Say, haul him up quick," urged Hen Dutcher fearfully. "We don't want'er drown him and get into any trouble."

But Ben and Ned were equally afraid of trouble. They hauled on the rope, bringing Dick's head above water.

"This is just what you need, freshie!" growled Ben. "You'd oughter had it long ago. How's the water—fine?"

The rope now supported Dick on the surface safely. He did not open his mouth to answer Alvord, but gazed up at him with eyes full of contempt.

"Down with him once more!" called Ned Allen. "Duck Mr. Freshie Prescott again!"

Once more the rope was paid out, and Dick sank two or three feet under water.

"Say, cut it out, now," urged one of the boys, beginning to grow white in the face. "We don't want'er all get sent to the reform school."

"That's what you all deserve!" rasped a new voice, and Dave Darrin his eyes ablaze, stepped out on to the wharf.

"Give me that rope!" he commanded.

"You low-down crowd!" uttered Tom Reade, his voice vibrating with a quality of anger that was unusual with him.

The rope was yielded without a word. Dick's tormentors were now all of them badly scared. Greg, Dan and Harry stood at the land-end of the wharf forming a line there.

In a twinkling Dave and Tom had Dick hoisted up out of the water. Tom whipped out his pocket knife and began to cut away at the cords.

"Say, you fellows needn't think you own everything!" blazed Ned Allen, some of his courage returning to him. Darrin wheeled like a flash, planting a blow on the neck that stretched Allen on the wharf.

Allen got to his feet, but Dave struck him twice more before he could fall the second time.

"You're next!" blurted Darrin, wheeling upon Ben Alvord.

"Let that alone, Dave!" called Dick, rising to his feet. "It's mine—all mine!"

Three or four of the late tormentors tried to get off the wharf. But Greg, Dan and Harry, blocking the narrow way to land, pushed them back with no gentle force.

Dick's voice was quiet enough as he turned to Ben.

"Alvord, I've had such a wetting in the water that I'm in big danger of catching a hard cold. Nothing but brisk exercise will save me. I propose to take that exercise out of you."

"Don't get fresh again," growled Ben, scared though trying to hide the fact.

"You called me mean-spirited a while ago," Dick went on, just as quietly as before. "Now you can find out whether I am, and you'll have as fair a chance as I. Put up your hands!"

"I ain't going to fight—here," cried Ben hoarsely.

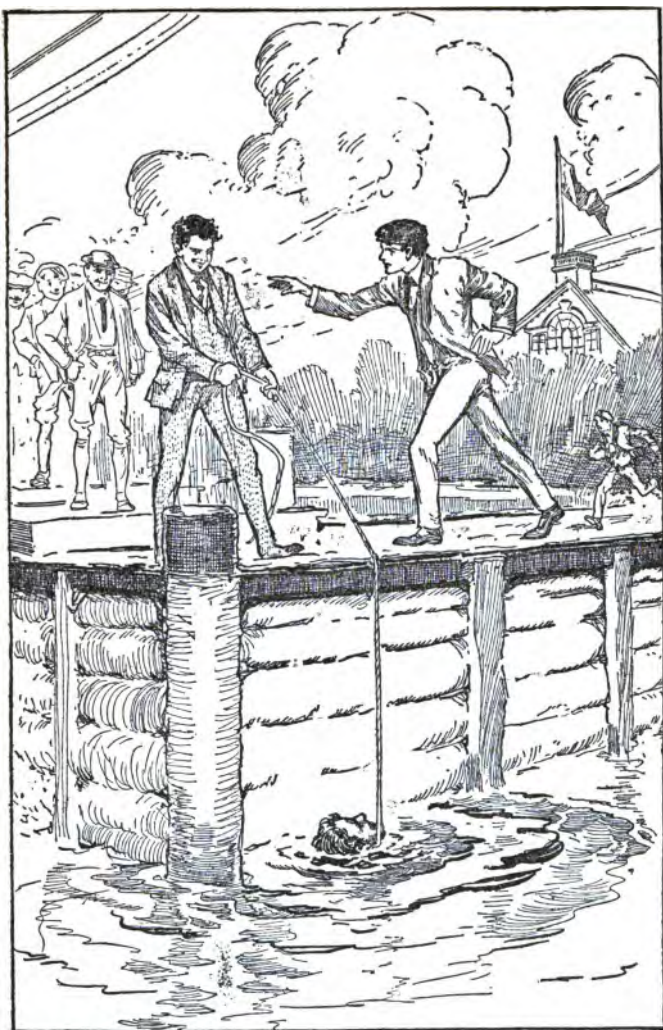
"There's a chill coming over me and I need the exercise," Dick cried. "Put up your hands. Do the best you can!"

"I ain't a-going to——" Alvord began over again.

"Then I'll hit you before you get your hands up," Dick insisted. "Look sharp—it's coming."

With that Prescott made a feint, just to warn his enemy. Then Dick went at Alvord in earnest. Ben, being a larger boy, defended himself very well for the first few moments. But finally Dick's fist landed hard on the end of the other fellow's nose.

"O-o-o-oh! Lemme alone," wailed Alvord,



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trying to back away. But Darrin pushed him back to the fray.

"I haven't half worked off my chill yet," Dick continued. "Here comes another!"

In a short time Ben Alvord was whipped to a full finish—all but the knockout. He lay on the wharf, blubbering. Dick stood over him.

"Alvord, you're bigger and heavier than I am, aren't you?"

"Ye-es," the cowed Ben admitted.

"Have you had enough?"

"I—I guess so."

"Yes or no!"

"Ye-es."

"Have you any spirit?"

"Not a bit," declared Ben promptly, warned by the battle light in Dick's eyes.

"Are you a coward?"

"Ye-es."

"You're no good on earth, are you?"

"N-n-not a bit," wailed Ben.

"I guess, then, that's about all any fellow in town wants to know about you," Dick wound up calmly.

"Now, we'll choose partners and sail in some more," proposed Darrin. "There are some other fellows here that need some of the same treatment."

"No, no!" Dick interposed. "This thing has

gone far enough. Before many hours the other fellows will all feel ashamed enough that they allowed Ben Alvord to use them for his private vengeance. We don't want any more fighting."

"And we don't need any more," suggested Tom, closing a notebook and putting it away in an inner pocket. "We know the whole crowd. I've written their names all down. Come along, Dick. You need some dry clothing on as soon as you can get it. The first part of May isn't in the swimming season."

"Let's take a jog, to keep Dick warmed up until he gets home," Darrin proposed. Off the six chums started.

"Now, why did Tom Reade go and write down all our names?" asked Hen Dutcher uneasily.

"I know," spoke up one of the boys. "That's so Dick Prescott's father can have us all arrested."

"Whew-ew-ew!"

That put a very serious face on matters.

"Do you believe Mr. Prescott will do it?" asked another boy.

"I dunno why not," answered the first speaker. "Mr. Prescott will feel sure, when he hears about it, that we were trying to drown Dick."

"Huh! Mr. Prescott might do such a trick," agreed Ned Allen.

"He will, if he's as big a sneak as his son," growled Ben Alvord.

"See here, Ben," came from another in the little group, "we're gettin' about tired of hearing you call Dick a sneak. When Dick got his hands free and came at you I noticed that you looked and acted a lot more like a sneak than he did."

Alvord choked and sputtered angrily. For a moment or two he could think of nothing to say. At last he blurted out with:

"And you fellows? Yes, you! What did you all look like? There were ten of us, and only five of that crowd, until they turned Prescott loose. Yet you let half your number of fellows walk right over you. You didn't any of you say 'boo!' I was the only one that did any fighting."

"You didn't fight, Ben," came the jeering retort. "You only thought you fought. You weren't in the fight at any stage of it."

"Some of us ought to get word to Dick Prescott's father that we meant it all just as a joke," came from another speaker. "Two or three of us could go to Mr. Prescott and explain that it was all Ben Alvord's fault."

"And Ned Allen's."

"I'm ashamed of this gang, anyway."

"Oh, you're as bad as any one else!"

Ben's crowd seemed likely to break up in a free fight. Soon Ben and Ned began to quarrel and all but came to blows. Finally the group split up into three parties and drifted away.

"Tom, why did you write down the names of all those fellows?" asked Greg, as they waited near the Prescott store for their leader to rub down and get into dry clothes.

"Just to scare 'em," laughed Tom. "By this time I'll wager they're all thinking it over, and they're half sure that they're going to be arrested. That will start fights within the ranks of Ben Alvord's crowd."

In the meantime, up in his own little room, Prescott, after having dried his skin, was getting a fine red glow all over his body by the aid of a coarse bath towel. After that he put on dry clothing, and came down into the street again.

"Say," called Dick, "how were you fellows able to find me so soon?"

"Easy enough," Dave answered. "We fellows all met on Main Street, and wondered where you were. That little fellow, Tom Hill, told us that he had seen Hen Dutcher piloting you over to Dobbs's wharf. We figured that there was mischief up, so we went there on the run."

"I wonder how Ben Alvord ever came to think

up such a crazy, reckless and lawbreaking scheme as he played on you?" pondered Greg.

"No one but an Alvord would ever do such a thing," returned Dick in disgust. "Which is but another way of saying that Ben Alvord is such a stupid fool that he hasn't brains enough to think up a saner and safer way of getting square with a fellow whom he hates."

"What would you do, Dick, to get even with a fellow you disliked utterly?" inquired Tom Reade thoughtfully.

"If I wholly disliked a fellow," Dick answered after a pause, "I don't believe I'd honor him by putting up a job on him. I'd aim to hurt his feelings by letting my conduct prove that I didn't consider him worth any kind of notice."

Then, after a pause, Prescott added:

"But when you come to think of it, fellows, it isn't as easy as it sounds to go on disliking a fellow all the time."

"Don't you detest Alvord?" grinned Dan.

"I don't esteem him very highly, just at present," Dick replied candidly. "But he may change a lot, and so may I. Who knows but that I'll look upon Ben as one of my best friends within the next year? However, fellows, this is Saturday, and we're letting the day go by in talk. Are we headed for Norton's woods?"

"We are," affirmed Tom solemnly.

CHAPTER VI

HIS MIDDLE NAME WAS "PICKLES"

"**S**AY," muttered Tom, pausing a moment as the boys were about to enter the woods, "I hope we don't meet Tige's two nearly-human friends, the tramps."

"Well, are you afraid of them?" demanded Dave.

"Not afraid enough to run, if we meet 'em," Tom answered. "But I am sufficiently afraid of 'em to feel that I'd just as soon not meet 'em to-day."

"Come on in, Dan," urged Dave, striding ahead. "We'll be the scouts. You needn't worry, Tom. If that pair are around here Dan and I will meet 'em first."

"I'll walk right behind you, Dave, and be ready to walk to your assistance," said Dan, with a grin that seemed to stretch from ear to ear. "I'll be right on hand, Darry, when you need me."

"Humph!" muttered Dave, striding on without turning to glance back. In Indian file, the boys continued on through the woods.

But they came out on the further side without having met the tattered pair.

"Our friends, the enemy, are gone," guessed Dick. "They must have fled to some other locality."

"We'll miss them, but agreeably," laughed Greg. "Now, what are we going to do to-day—sprint or run over the measured mile?"

"That's what we've got to decide on," announced Dick.

"I want to do some sprinting," put in Dave.

"Same here," agreed Dan.

"Suppose we do some sprinting," hinted Dick. "After that some running jumps."

"And then——" asked Hazelton.

"Then," broke in Tom solemnly, "it'll be time to tramp home to dinner."

"Oh, pshaw!" muttered Greg disgustedly. "Why didn't we think to bring food with us?"

"How much money is there in the treasury, Dick, after our winter camping?" inquired Dave.

"Something more than three dollars."

"Where is the money?"

"Dad is keeping it until we call for it."

"I'll tell you what would be a lot more fun," Greg went on eagerly. "It's too fine out in the woods to go home. "Let's draw straws, the two who get the shortest to be a committee to go into town. The two can draw money from Dick's father and then buy steak, potatoes and

pie, and bring the stuff back here. While the committee are gone we'll build a camp fire. Then the potatoes can be roasted in their jackets in the embers of the fire. We can build a second fire to broil the steak over, on the ends of green sticks. As for the pie——"

"If that committee doesn't get started soon," grumbled Tom, "I shall feel like fighting. Greg's bill of fare has started my mouth to watering."

"Is it a go, fellows?" Dick asked. "All in favor——"

"Aye!" came the rousing chorus.

"I'll pull grass and cut it for the straws," offered Dan, springing up from the grass.

"No need to," suggested Dick. "I'll be one of the committee. Greg, will you go with me?"

"I don't see how I can hang back," laughed Greg. "Fellows, we're going to be spry, so you'll have to hustle the firewood. Got any matches?"

"I have," announced Hazelton.

"Come along, Greg," called Dick. He and young Holmes were soon deep in the woods.

"Say, I'm beginning to think that I'm a genius," chuckled Greg. "Did you ever see any one make a bigger hit with the crowd than I did just now?"

"You surely did," Dick acknowledged. "And

I've a notion that a feed talk is always a sure way to make a hit with a crowd."

"Say, if the cash holds out, couldn't we add a little something else to the stuff that we're going to bring back with us?"

"Canned peaches?" inquired Prescott.

"Or nut cake?"

"Pickles?"

"Pickles? That's your middle name. You're both pickled!"

The man who startled the lads with this hoarse announcement reached suddenly out from the other side of a big oak tree, seizing young Prescott by the coat collar.

"You're in it, too," chuckled another man, leaping through a hedge of bushes, pouncing on Greg before that startled youngster had time to think of turning and running.

"Dave! Tom——" called Dick on the instant. He tried to yell at the top of his voice, but a big hand closed roughly over his mouth, smothering most of the sound. In the same instant the other man's disengaged hand passed over Holmes's mouth.

Their captors were the same tattered pair who, at the last meeting, had left the Grammar School boys treed, with Tige on guard beneath.

"Now, we've got you two fine young busy-bodies," growled Dick's captor exultantly.

"Hold your tongues, too. For every sound you try to make you'll get—not a cuff, but a knock-out blow. Don't take any chances on riling us! Come along, now—and silence is the word."

Dick's captor started off briskly, with a savage grip at Prescott's collar. He dragged the boy the first few feet. Then Dick, summoning all his energies, clenched his fists and tried to fight.

"What's that? You want a fistful of soothing syrup from my right?" demanded the rough one. "You'll get it if you fuss."

"If you want me to go along with you," Dick retorted warmly, "stop dragging me by the collar. If you do that any more I'll fight you as long as I last."

The big fellow surveyed Dick in amazement at first. Then he broke into jeering laughter that had in it a trace of admiration.

"You've got grit, anyway, small boy. If you'll agree that you won't try any tricks on us, then I'll just keep hold of your arm and let you walk along with me. But no nonsense—or you won't get over being sorry as long as you live!"

Though Dick and Greg now walked meekly enough beside their captors, both boys were keenly alert for any chance that might offer for a dash to freedom.

"We're not making fast enough time," declared the leader of the tattered pair, at last. "Put on more steam, younkers."

"You've got us almost panting now," Dick objected.

"No matter! Panting will strengthen your heart action. Speed up, both of you, if you don't want to run into a lot of trouble that you won't be able to stop."

There was something about this leader of the evil pair that was convincing. Dick and Greg felt themselves obliged to hasten along. Nor even once did either boy find himself without that compelling grip on his arm.

Through the deeper woods Grammar School boys and captors went, going ever further away from Gridley and the usual haunts of men.

"Where are you going to walk us to?" growled Greg. "Florida or Canada?"

"All you've got to do is to keep moving," retorted the leader of the tattered pair. "We'll do all the thinking for the crowd."

But at last even this forced march was bound to come to an end. Their conductors finally led the boys into a clearing of little more than a quarter of an acre in extent. In about the center of this spot stood what looked like an old excavation. It was about ten feet square, and some eight feet in depth. The earth taken

out of this hole had long ago been carried away elsewhere. Though Dick and Greg did not know it, this hole had once been dug as cellar to a house planned by a hermit.

"Here, Leo!" called one of the tattered pair.
"Where are you, sir?"

From the woods beyond came a low growl, mingled with a whine. Then into the scene trotted a bull-dog that caused Dick Prescott to rub his eyes. The brute looked to be the same who had lately treed Dick & Co.

"Leo," said the leader of the pair, glancing down at the dog, "these are two of the Paul Prys who were the means of getting your brother shot by the police. What do you think of this pair?"

As though understanding what had been said to him, the bull-dog snarled, displaying his cruel fangs. He eyed Dick as though about to spring at him.

"No need of holding on to you any longer," said Dick's captor gruffly, at the same time releasing his arm. "If you try to run, Leo will bring you back. He'll stop you, anyway."

"Going to drop the youngsters down in the hole, Tim?" inquired the other tattered one.

"Yes," nodded the leader. "They'll 'keep' there better than anywhere else in these woods. Down with you—both of you!" ordered the

man addressed as Tim, shoving Dick toward the edge of the old cellar.

"Do you expect me to jump?" Dick demanded. He did not feel like showing fight with Leo at his heels, showing unmistakable signs of hostility.

"Yep. Boys who practise the way you youngsters do, won't mind a jump like that."

"Hold that dog, then," insisted Prescott. "I don't want him jumping down there after me."

"Hold the pup, Bink," directed Tim. Bink obeyed. Dick, without another word, let himself down easily over the edge of the excavation, landing on his toes.

"You're next, younker," Tim commanded, turning to Greg. Young Holmes landed beside Dick.

"You two youngsters are warranted to be there when we want you," leered Tim, bending over the edge of the hole as he lighted a short, black, villianous-smelling pipe and puffed away. "We're sure you'll stay there, because we're going to leave Leo on watch at this hole. You may figure that one boy can stand on the other's shoulders and thus climb out. The fellow on top will find Leo's fangs grinning in his face. Better not take any chances, boys, for we're coming back later and we'll want to find you all right, sound and whole."

"You'll want us?" Dick called up scornfully.

"Yes, siree!"

"For what are you going to want us?"

"It wouldn't be exactly wise in us to tell you younkers that now," replied Tim, slowly, coolly. "But we'll want you just the same, and we'll have something fine for you to do for us, by and by."

"Do you think we'd do anything for you?" Dick queried in a voice cool with contempt.

"When the time comes for you to do it—yes; I think you'll be ready enough to do it for us. Do we look like the kind of men that it would be safe to fool with? Good-bye, now, younker, and, if you happen to want anything, just holler for the dog. He'll jump down among you two if you do much in the hollering line. Won't you, Leo?"

A low growl from the dog answered.

"Good-bye, lads," wound up Tim, turning slowly away. "If you're wise you'll turn to and nap some, just at present. For you're pretty sure to be up about all night long."

"Bye," added Bink, who had not shown himself at the edge of the hole. "Leo, pup, you stay and watch these younkers. If they get funny, Leo—why, just use your own judgment, doggie—that's all!"

Dick and Greg heard them tramping away.

CHAPTER VII

TIM PROPOSES TO "BORROW"

"MY, but this is fine!" uttered Greg ironically.

"If you like it," muttered Dick ruefully, "enjoy yourself!"

"What on earth are we to do now?" Greg demanded.

"Find some way of getting out of this mess," gritted Dick.

"Can we do it?"

"Ask me something easier. But, Greg, if we're not out of here within an hour or two at the longest, it won't be for the lack of trying."

"What's the use of trying?" sighed Greg rather dismally. "There's just one way out, and up at the top is that confounded bull-dog."

"Of course we've got to get him out of the way before we can make any real move at escaping," Dick agreed.

"But how?"

"See this?" asked Dick, prodding in the dirt wall with both hands and prying out a stone slightly larger than his fist. "Suppose this hit the dog between the eyes?"

"Fine!" assented Greg almost cheerfully.
"But what if it missed him?"

"He'd probably jump down here, of course. Bad as it is to have the beast up above, it would be a lot worse to have him down here with us."

"I wonder if the dog is up there at all?" Greg went on.

"Perhaps we can find out," Dick hinted, picking up a pebble. This he tossed up so that it landed on the ground above.

"Gr-r-r-r!" came the instant response, though Leo did not show himself.

"There's the beast," grunted Dick. "Rolling his 'r's,' as the fellow said in the play."

"Toss up another pebble," urged Greg. "That may bring the pup to the edge of the hole. Then you'll know whether you can throw a bigger stone and settle him."

Dick did so. With a short yelp Leo bounded to the edge of the hole, peering down with his bloodshot eyes, showing his ugly teeth and acting as though he were about to leap.

"I guess it isn't safe to raise my arm to throw," sighed Dick. "That beast would be in the air, and on his way down here, before I could throw."

"I'll wager that he would," nodded Greg. "And that would shorten our days considerably. That brute would tear us to pieces."

"If the cur does get down here one of us may be able to settle him," guessed Dick. "But it would have to be while the dog was chewing up the other chap. One of us would be pretty sure to be badly mangled."

"Then I reckon we'll stay here and keep quiet," muttered young Holmes. "After all, what else is there any sense in trying to do? Those fellows who call themselves Tim and Bink wouldn't have left us here if they didn't feel pretty sure that we'd have to stay here until they chose to come back."

"I wonder what the rascals want us to do to-night?" pondered Prescott aloud.

"I don't know," Greg replied, "and I'm afraid to guess. It will be some pretty mean trick, you may be sure. Oh, I hope Dave, Tom and the rest are looking for us—and find us."

"That, I guess, is our sole chance of getting away from here," Dick continued. "Oh, dear! I hope Dave and Tom think to explore the woods in this direction, but I doubt it."

Leo, after standing patiently by the edge of the excavation for some minutes, looking down at the boys, finally retired out of sight.

The afternoon came and dragged on. There was still no sign of any attempt at rescue.

"I'll bet the fellows are fussing because we don't get back with the food," said Greg.

"Yes; and by and by they'll begin to understand that something has happened to us."

"And then they'll try to get on our trail," spoke Greg hopefully.

"First of all, they'll doubtless go back to Gridley, to see if anything happened to us in town."

"When they find out that we never got back to town," decided Greg, "it will then be late in the afternoon."

"If the conditions were more pleasant," spoke Dick, after another long pause, "I know that I'd be feeling mighty hungry by this time."

"Not even the conditions prevent me from feeling woefully hungry," grunted Holmes.

"Even a sandwich——" began Dick.

"What kind? Chicken?"

"Don't!" begged Dick.

Before the afternoon wore away both boys felt that they would gladly exchange a sandwich, if they had one, for just a glass of water.

Every little while Leo sauntered to the edge of the excavation and looked down, as though to show them that he was still on duty.

"Tim and Bink said they'd be back here this evening," Dick murmured at last.

"Yes," sniffed Greg. "But they're not the kind of men whose word I'd care to take on any subject."

"The sky is growing a lot darker," announced Prescott some minutes later. "Here that?"

Away off in the direction that they judged Gridley to be a long test blast sounded on the fire-alarm whistle.

"That means that it's ten minutes of seven," Dick went on. "But—say! Hear that?"

Right on the heels of the test blow came another call—thirty-nine. Both Dick and Greg stood erect, silent, their hearts beating fast.

"There it goes again!" cried Greg. "You'll find that it will sound three times. And thirty-nine, three times, is the signal to call men out to search for a lost child."

"Meaning us, beyond a doubt!" cried Dick. "Oh, don't I wish that searching party luck!"

"The searching party won't have any luck, though," sounded a jeering voice above, and then the face of Tim showed at the edge of the old cellar. We'll guarantee that no searchers find you."

"So you two are back, are you?" Dick demanded in a frigid voice.

"Yes—both of us," grinned Bink, showing himself. "Don't set any store by that whistle, boys. It won't do you any good."

"Getting tired of being down there?" hailed Tim.

"Nonsense!" Dick rejoined ironically. "We've been having a lovely time all afternoon. You ought to have been here."

"Having a party, were you?" jeered Tim.

"Sorter," Greg rejoined laconically.

"Was the party strong on the eats?" inquired Bink, holding up to the view of the boys what looked like a sandwich. "I don't suppose you'd care for any of this kind of stuff?"

"We couldn't possibly tell you," Dick returned, "unless we had a chance for a closer look at what you're holding."

For reply, Bink brought a paper bag into sight, dropping the sandwich into it. Then he tossed the bag down into the hole. Dick picked it up, bringing ham and chicken sandwiches to view.

"Got any use for it?" Bink demanded.

"Yes; but we'd like some water even more."

Chuckling, Bink thrust a hand into a coat pocket, bringing out a bottle, which he also dropped into the hole.

"Taste it, and see whether it's water, or—what?" Dick directed.

"It's water, all right," nodded Greg, after a distinct smack of his lips. "Here, have some."

While the two Grammar School boys ate and drank, darkness settled over the scene rapidly.

"Tie the pup for a minute, Bink," Tim next directed. Then, throwing himself down on the ground, reached down with one hand.

"Grip a-hold, and I'll haul you out of there," Tim directed Dick. Greg was hoisted up next, after which Leo was promptly freed.

"Just so you won't have any notion of watching your chance to run away," Bink explained, with a hoarse chuckle.

"Now, then, younkers," Tim continued, as all but the dog remained seated on the ground, "I'll tell you what's up to-night. You know where the Second National Bank is in Gridley?"

"Of course," Prescott nodded. This was the bank of which Bert Dodge's father was an official.

"We're going down to that bank about midnight," Tim continued easily. "We're going to borrow some money there—while the bank clerks are all out, you understand. And you two younkers are going to help us borrow the money."

"We're not!" Dick Prescott shot back, all the color receding from his face.

"Oh, yes, you are!" chuckled Tim. "You may think you'll be brave enough to refuse. But your refusal won't last long. You're going to help us to-night. Give you my word of honor you are!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE TATTERED PAIR ARE TALENTED PLANNERS

"YOU two are too young to die," said Bink musingly. "Yet, if either of you tries to refuse, or to balk us to-night, that's about what's going to happen to you."

"If you want to 'string' us," Dick retorted, "why don't you try something that isn't so easy to see through? Even if we wanted to help you, how could we do it? We haven't had a bit of experience at the kind of rascality that you're talking about. We'd be worse than no help at all."

"That's where you're wrong," replied Tim. "As it happens, you can do the very thing that we can't do."

"I don't believe you. What is it?"

"How big do you judge I am around the waist line?" asked Tim, employing one hand in stroking his ample girth. "Look at friend Bink. He's as big as I am. Now, you boys are plenty slim enough even to crawl into rat holes."

"Are there any rat holes at the bank?" queried Prescott.

"There's something in the same line. Have

you ever noticed the windows at the back of the bank?"

"Yes," Dick admitted. "There are iron bars over the windows, put there on purpose to keep out such gentry as you."

"Bars?" repeated Tim. "Humph! Men of our kind can get the bars off in five minutes!"

"That ought to be easy for you, then," said Prescott.

"But those bars, and the windows, and all, are connected with the police station by burglar alarm wires," Tim went on. "We could cut the wires if they were strung on poles like the telephone and electric light wires. But these burglar alarm wires run through pipes that are six feet down in the ground. Do you begin to see?"

"I don't see where we are expected to come in," Dick replied, eager enough to be informed on that very point.

"Well, it's like this, younker. The rear windows of the bank open on an alley way, don't they?"

"Yes."

"And it isn't hard to get down that alley way, at midnight, without being seen. Yet Bink and myself can't do anything in that alley way if the burglar alarm is going to call the cops as soon as we set to work on the bars over the

windows. Just as it happens, however, there's a narrow transom over each window that isn't barred. Through one of those transoms Bink or myself could get only as far as our necks. But slim youngsters like you can be pushed—squeezed right in through the transom-way."

"What then?" Dick questioned.

"Why, we know where the burglar alarm box is inside, and we'll post you how to go there and with one nip cut the wire that would otherwise send word to the police. Then we'll take the bars off a window and be in there in no time. You youngsters will have a little handful of some of the money that we borrow at the bank to-night."

Dick gave a half shudder of disgust.

"Don't believe that you can play any funny tricks on us, either," Bink broke in. "All the time you two are in the bank you'll be right in our line of sight. At the first move by either of you to fool us, we'll fill you with bullets!"

As Bink spoke, he threw back his coat, revealing the butt of a revolver sticking from either hip pocket.

"So, you see," Tim went on easily, "your work will all be cut out for you to-night. You'll do just what we want, and there won't be a ghost of a safe chance for you youngsters to fool us."

"We'll fool you another way," Greg broke in hotly.

"How's that?" queried Tim without any sign of annoyance.

"We simply won't do what you want of us."

"Oh, yes, you will," drawled Tim.

"I won't—not if you kill me for refusing," spoke up young Holmes with spirit. "Neither will Dick. I know my friend!"

"Go ahead and sputter until your tongue is tired," retorted Tim. "You'll wind up, just the same, by doing what we tell you, and you'll do it right. I'm not worried about that. If you boys were foolish enough to balk you'd be the only ones who'd have any need to do any worrying."

"And don't let any idea run away with you," urged Bink, "that you'll go along with us all right at first, and then raise a yell and bring help when we get in Gridley."

"You might try it, of course," Tim added. "But if you did we'd finish you two, once and for all, and then take to our heels. But nothing would ever be able to bring you youngers back to this life."

"We won't have anything to do with it," Greg insisted obstinately. "Will we, Dick?"

"Well, let me see——" young Prescott drawled thoughtfully.

"Wha-a-at!" exploded Greg, unable to believe his ears.

"It's all right to be brave, when you have any show at all," Dick went on slowly. "But it sounds like foolishness to be stubborn about showing sand when you haven't a chance in the world."

"You've a long head, Prescott," nodded Tim.

"But I'd rather be dead than a thief, even by force!" Holmes insisted.

"I'd rather be alive," Dick assured him. "I hate this work, and wish I could keep out of it. But——"

"It's the 'but' that sticks," grinned Bink. "Prescott, you're all right!"

"I don't value your compliments over much," Dick answered coldly, turning to look in the fellow's eyes. "Please don't bother me with any more."

In the meantime astounded Greg was doing some swift thinking.

"Why, confound it, I begin to understand!" muttered Holmes inwardly. "Dick is only making believe. He has some plan in his own mind by which he hopes to beat these scoundrels. That's it! I couldn't believe that Dick Prescott, of all boys in the world, had lost his grit as readily."

"You'll get caught, though, as easily as can

be," Dick predicted after a pause. "You men seem to forget that the bank is left lighted by electricity, and that policemen and others from the street have a full view of the whole floor. Why, any man on the sidewalk can look in and see the door of the big safe."

"We've thought that all out," chuckled Tim indulgently. "We'll have the plan beaten, as you will see."

"Perhaps you plan to spread a sheet of canvas, or something like that, in front of the safe while you're working away at the door," scoffed Prescott. "Probably you don't believe that a curtain before the safe door would strike passers by as anything strange."

"All you have to do," declared Tim, "is to wait and see how the trick is carried off."

"Sh-h!" whispered Bink, then lay over on the ground, one ear close to the earth.

"Don't you younkers make any noise," Tim whispered sternly.

"It's all right," muttered Bink, rising once more to sitting posture. "I wanted to make sure that no one was headed this way. With my ear to the ground I couldn't make out a sound."

"If any one comes," Tim retorted, "the dog will give us first notice, and one that we won't overlook."

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"You men can't be very well used to 'borrowing money' at midnight at banks," said Dick after another pause, "or you wouldn't think you were going to have such an easy time to-night."

"It'll be the easiest thing in the world," retorted Tim. "You wait and see. At the right moment Bink will nip a wire that we've located. He'll climb a pole, put on rubber gloves and nip a wire that will leave all that part of Main Street in darkness, the bank included. Folks who notice it will just think that the power house has shut off light on account of some little accident to the dynamo."

"But——"

"You might as well stop now, younker. The rest of what there is to see you'll learn when we get on the spot and get at work. I wouldn't be surprised if to-night's excitement, and a look at the way easy money is made, will make you want to stay by us all the time. Now, keep quiet. Don't talk any more."

Tim and Bink, despite their assurances, seemed to grow much more restless as time slipped by. Dick, watching the men closely though slyly, began to feel that neither of the rascals was quite as old in crime as he pretended to be. Laten on both men showed a disposition to start at every little sound.

"I wish that some of the hunting parties that are out would manage to find us," sighed Prescott inwardly. "These rascals may just have the luck to fluke it through their night's adventure and get away with a lot of the bank's money. And that's where my dad has his little account. Dad might lose most of his money, and I heard him tell mother, the other day, that he couldn't stand a very big money-pinch just at present."

Leo, though now untied, showed no disposition to stray away. He lay on the ground, opening one eye, or both, each time that Dick or Greg moved ever so little. At such times the dog gave a warning growl.

From time to time Tim took off his cap, placing a small pocket electric lamp inside the head-gear. Thus he consulted his watch without having to expose a light.

"It's time, Bink," he said, at last, replacing watch and lamp. "It's time for us to be moving."

Bink, with a start and a sigh, got upon his feet. The fellow's hands shook as he emptied his pipe.

"Pull yourself together," growled Tim. "You'll get busy at the first stop. It will be your job to drive the horses out."

"All right," nodded Bink briefly.

For more than half an hour the little party

tramped on rapidly through the forest. Dick and Greg would have given words to be able to take to their heels, but they knew that the dog, running along behind them, would quickly and savagely stop at least one of them.

Now Tim led the way into a road, and soon they came in sight of a barn belonging to a near-by farmhouse.

"I'll watch," whispered Tim, halting the boys. "Bink, go in and hitch up the horses. Then drive right out. Don't stop unless you hear from me."

Bink vanished into the barn. Up at the farmhouse no lights showed. Plainly the farmer and his household were all asleep.

"This is what a man misses by not keeping a dog," muttered Dick.

"Our friend up yonder had a dog this afternoon," chuckled Tim. "But we happened along and left some meat for the dog just before we brought the sandwiches, and we know what was in that meat."

Dick shot a look of keen disgust at the self-confessed dog poisoner. Tim, though he saw the look, did not appear disturbed.

Soon the barn doors opened. A pair of horses appeared, drawing a wagon piled high with hay.

"Now, what are you going to do with that load of hay?" demanded Greg Holmes curiously.

"You'll see," grinned Tim.

"It's a big shame," came indignantly from Dick, "to steal one man's property as an aid to more stealing."

"Stealing?" protested Tim, in an injured tone. "Now, that just shows how easy it is to misjudge a man's actions. Bink and I have already paid for that load of hay. Paid the farmer who lives up there in the house, too."

"Yes, you did!" uttered Dick incredulously.

"We did," Tim asserted. "The farmer's name is Dartwell. We've engaged him to deliver a load of hay to us in Stayton to-morrow morning at six o'clock. See? That made it certain that he'd stack the hay on this afternoon so as to be able to make an early start in the morning. We paid Dartwell fifteen dollars for the hay, and he has the money now."

"You're stealing his horses, anyway," Dick insisted.

"Not even that, for Dartwell will recover his rig to-morrow, and the hay he'll get back. As it's already paid for the farmer's profit will pay him handsomely for the hire of his horses to-night."

Bink drew up at the side of the road, where the others awaited him.

"Lively, now, younkers," ordered Tim. "I'll give you a hand up to the top of the load."

Before long all three were up there.

"Now, you two lads burrow into the hay," Tim commanded. Cover yourselves up, all but enough of your faces for breathing. "When you've done that I'll cover myself up. It isn't necessary to show more than Bink on this load of hay."

Bink, in the meantime, had started the team down the road. Under orders Dick and Greg burrowed into the hay. Tim helped them to conceal themselves more effectually.

"Now, remember one thing," admonished the rascal. "If we pass any one, even any of the searching parties that may be out looking for you, don't let out a yip, or it will be the worst thing you ever did. We won't stand even a hint of foolishness on your part. And don't try to slip out of the hay to the ground, for the bulldog is jogging along with the wagon. Now, be as sensible as you can."

With that warning Tim moved forward over the fragrant hay to whisper a few words to Bink.

"Greg," Dick found chance to whisper in his chum's ear, "whatever I call to you to do to-night, do it instantly without stopping to ask questions. We may be able to outwit this pair and save the bank, too."

Tim was coming back. Greg had chance to

do no more than nudge his chum through the hay.

"Thank goodness Dick *has* a plan!" throbbed Greg Holmes. "I *knew* he wouldn't have given in so easily if he hadn't something useful up his sleeve. I wonder what his scheme is?"

For some two miles the horses plodded along the road before Bink reined up.

"Here's where you hid the bag, Tim," whispered the driver. "There is no one in sight. Be quick."

Tim wriggled out of the hay, next slipping to the ground. There were woods at the right, and into these the fellow hastened.

"We were hiding that bag the first time you boys came upon us," grunted Bink, in a low voice. "You youngers were so nosey that we had to find a new hiding place."

Tim was soon back, passing up to Bink a much-worn and apparently very heavy valise. Both Tim and bag were hidden in the hay a few moments later, and the journey was resumed.

Less than an hour later the wagon load of hay and its queer, assorted human freight were moving down Main Street, Gridley.

CHAPTER IX

“THANKS”—IN THE EYE

THE wagon stopped at the very entrance to the alley-way leading behind the building of the Second National Bank. As it happened this corner was one of the street markets where farmers usually stood with loads of hay for sale. Even should a Gridley policeman see the load of hay standing there in the night time, and an apparent farmer beside it, the bluecoat's suspicions would not be aroused. Farmers with loads of hay for sale often drove in during the night, in order to be on hand early in the morning. The fact that Sunday was not a usual market day was not calculated to occur to a policeman if he saw nothing else suspicious about the standing load of hay.

Bink made a hasty survey extending as far as Main Street.

“All clear,” he reported, in a very low voice, as he came back. “Better tumble out lively.”

“Get out, younkers, and slip fast into the alley-way,” ordered Tim. “Don’t try any funny business, either. This might turn out to be a bad night’s work for you.”

Shaking a good deal, Dick and Greg obeyed.

To them there was nothing in the least like romance in this sneaking work. A thief was a thief, and apparently Tim and Bink were among the lowest of their low kind.

Leo, the bull-dog, kept close at the heels of the boys.

"Now, remember, doggie," whispered Tim, bending over the dog, "we don't want any barking or growling. Take hold of anything that gets in our way, but not a sound out of you."

The bull-dog looked up mutely into the man's face, wagging his tail.

"All clear, Bink," whispered the other rascal. "On your post!"

Bink stepped off toward Main Street, while Tim piloted the boys up the dark, still alley way, Leo keeping at their heels and more alert than ever.

Behind a store near the bank were a lot of empty packing cases. These, at Tim's order, the Grammar School boys brought and placed noiselessly under one of the windows, pyramid fashion.

"Now, up with you," ordered Tim. "I'll follow. Watch sharp, now!"

The man was soon up beside them. With a few quick moves, and astonishingly little noise Tim removed the glass from the narrow transom.

"Now, in with you," ordered Tim, turning to Greg. "Once you're inside you stand close to the window until you get your orders. Don't think you're safe from me, inside. You see this?"

Tim displayed a revolver.

"I can get at you with this from the back, and Bink can reach you through the front windows. Don't try to do anything funny!"

"What do you take us for?" Dick demanded indignantly.

"When both of you boys are inside," Tim continued, "and get the word from me, then you go forward until you come to that box that you see on the wall half-way down the room. There's a glass door to the box. Never mind that glass door. You'll find a wire that comes out of the box at the top and runs into the wall. Prescott, take this pair of nippers. Catch the wire just where it runs into the wall. Cut the wire with one swift snip, and you'll shut off the burglar alarm. Be careful that you get the wire with one snip."

"I understand," nodded Dick, taking the pliers.

"Why are you boys shivering so?" demanded Tim gruffly.

"You ought to remember that we're not used to this sort of thing," Dick retorted.

"That's so. Up with you, Holmes!"

Greg was boosted up and in at the narrow transom way. In another moment young Holmes was inside and down on the floor of the well-lighted counting-room of the bank. Then Dick was beside him. Both boys were shaking.

"Steady!" came the warning voice of Tim. "Now, hustle forward and do the trick!"

Dick, the pliers in his hand, took the lead, Greg slinking along at his heels.

How young Prescott's heart throbbed! For here was where he planned to foil the scoundrels!

At the middle of the aisle Dick made a sudden spring at the wall.

"Duck, Greg!" he called, in a quivering voice, as his hand fell upon a brass lever that lay against the wall.

The next instant the counting room was in darkness, for Dick Prescott had turned off the master switch that controlled the night lights of the bank. A wild ejaculation of rage from Tim, at the rear.

Smash! crash! Then Dick sprang to safety in the darkness, for he had no assurance that both men wouldn't fire into the place.

As Dick struck the floor on hands and knees, and moved rapidly, he bumped into another figure.

"Greg!" he whispered.

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"Yes. What's up?"

"After turning off the light I broke in the glass door of the burglar alarm system and pulled down the hook. If the system is working the police of Gridley have the alarm by this time, and are hustling in this direction."

"Great old Dick!" breathed Greg exultantly, as he groped in the dark. "Old fellow, give me your hand on that bold stroke!"

"Better not take my hand," said Dick laconically. "It's wet."

"Wet?"

"I cut my hand on the glass when I broke in the door of the box. But there was no time to waste in doing the thing gently. Oh, I hope the system is working."

"You had this planned out in the woods?"

"Partly," Dick whispered.

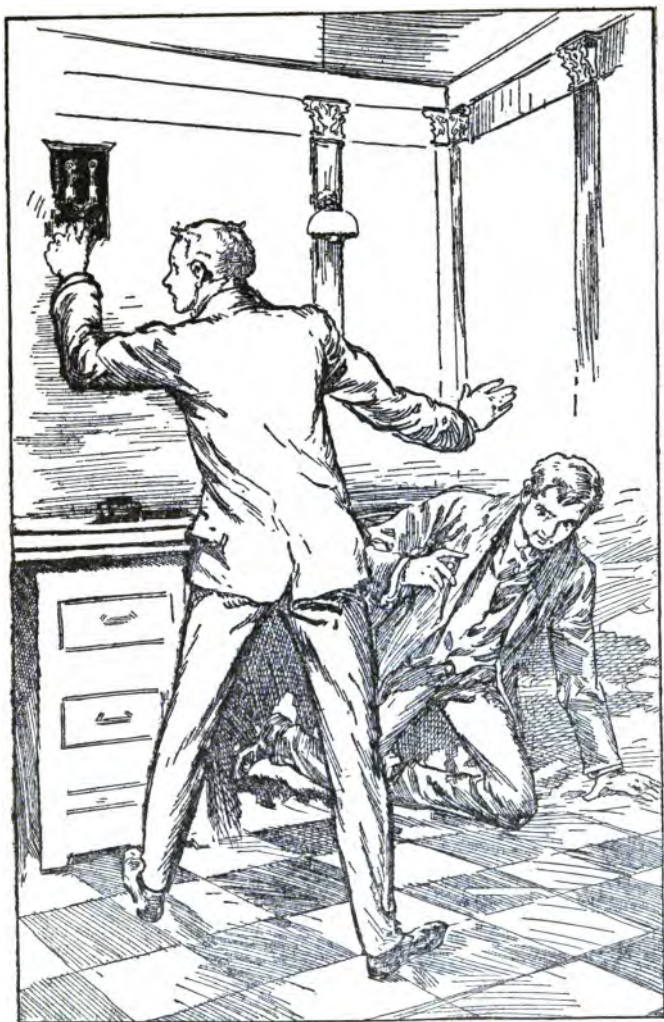
"How did you know the location so well?"

"Because I often bring Dad's deposit here. I've seen that switch and the alarm box dozens of times."

"I wonder what our two friends, the enemy, are doing?"

"If they're wise they've scooted," Dick replied, in a whisper.

"If they'd been really wise," chuckled Greg, "they'd never have forced Dick Prescott to help in a piece of villainy like this."



“Duck, Greg!”

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Out on the street a thrilling whistle was followed instantly by a shot.

"The trouble must have started," whispered Dick exultantly.

"I'd like to hear what old Tim is saying now!" chuckled Greg.

"I wouldn't," Dick rejoined dryly. "Tim isn't a gentleman, and doesn't keep to a gentleman's rules of speech."

Breathless, nearly, both boys waited for the sounds of more shots. These, however, seemed likely to be a long time in coming.

"I can see that the electric lights are burning in the street," whispered Dick, a little later. "I guess that fellow, Bink didn't have time to shut off the service."

Bang-bang! sounded, suddenly, on Main Street. Bang! bang! bang!

"It's the real thing, this time," whispered Dick.

"We can talk out loud, now," proposed Greg. "You may be sure that Tim isn't at the rear window any longer. He must be doing some fast running."

"Or else some rapid shooting," added Prescott, as a new chorus of shots came from the street. "No need of our crouching down here any longer. The shots are further away, now."

So both boys got up, moving down the aisle

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toward the street door. Boylike, they were anxious to be as near the scene of the trouble as possible.

Soon there came a rush of feet toward the door. A policeman and two citizens ran up, trying to peer into the darkened place.

"There must be some one inside, or else the alarm couldn't have been turned in and the lights switched off," spoke one of the citizens. Dick at once recognized the voice of Bert Dodge's father, who was vice-president of the bank.

"We're in here, Mr. Dodge!" Prescott hailed, at once.

"Who are you?"

"Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes."

"How came you in there? How did you get in?" demanded Mr. Dodge thunderstruck.

"We were boosted in through a transom over a rear window."

"Wha-at? How—why—"

"It's too long a story, Mr. Dodge, to bawl through a plate glass door," Dick continued.

"Can't you unlock the door and let us out."

In his excitement the vice-president of the bank had stood there, holding his bunch of keys without using them. Now he used his keys with such a trembling hand that the policeman took the keys, inserted one in the door and swung that barrier open.

"How much damage has been done?" demanded Mr. Dodge, shaking in his anxiety.

"A rear transom broken—that's all, sir," Dick answered.

"Now, tell me, instantly, how you boys came to be in here," insisted Mr. Dodge.

This Dick did, as briefly as possible, assisted by a few words here and there from young Holmes.

"That's a most remarkable story, Prescott," remarked Mr. Dodge incredulously. "I suppose you expect me to believe it?"

By this time the investigators had moved down the aisle to where the vice-president could reach up and switch on the electric lights.

"D-d-don't you believe us?" gasped Dick.

Greg's face, also, expressed consternation.

"I might believe it," replied Mr. Dodge sourly. "But you see, Prescott, I had the misfortune to be born earlier than yesterday. By your own colored statement you came here with intending burglars, and allowed them to put you inside this bank, where you do not belong. Officer," he continued, turning around to the policeman, "in the face of what you have heard does your duty seem clear to you?"

CHAPTER X

FAMOUS IN GRIDLEY TOWN

“I—I’M afraid I don’t quite understand you, sir,” stammered Dick, his face growing deathly pale.

“It isn’t necessary that you should,” snapped Mr. Dodge. “Officer, I repeat, does your duty seem quite clear to you?”

“Your meaning doesn’t, at any rate, sir,” replied the policeman.

“Isn’t it plain enough, officer, that these boys should be taken into custody, and at least held during an investigation into their conduct?”

“If you charge them, sir, with being concerned in an attempt to rob this bank, then I shall be obliged to take them into custody,” replied the policeman.

“The idea!” burst from Greg indignantly. “After what we—Dick, especially—did to save this place from being robbed!”

“Can’t you take care of these boys, Mr. Policeman, without my direct complaint?” pressed Mr. Dodge, gazing in wonder at the bluecoat’s inaction.

“I cannot, sir; or, if I can, I won’t—not on my own responsibility. I’ve known these lads

for some years, Mr. Dodge, and I, for one, believe their story."

"Oh, well, officer, follow your own judgment, and be responsible to the authorities for your actions," Mr. Dodge called back as he hastened over to the door of the big safe. "I see that the vault hasn't been tampered with, so that none of the cash is gone."

"Do you know anything against these boys, sir?" questioned the policeman.

"Nothing very much, personally, though my son informs me that they belong to a very reckless and worthless gang of youngsters."

"His son tells him that!" sniffed Dick contemptuously, though Mr. Dodge did not hear. The policeman did, however, and repressed a grin, for he knew well enough that Bert Dodge was not one of the dependable boys of the town.

"Well, I don't see that we can do anything more in here, except to remain here until we can set a guard for the night," went on Mr. Dodge. "Officer, have you done anything with these boys yet?"

"No, sir; and I'm not going to do anything unless you will make a definite charge."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Dodge, and stepped over behind the bank's counter, as though he thought it possible to find something wrong there.

"The best thing you boys can do is to beat

the record time away from here," whispered the policeman to Dick.

"Why should we?" Prescott demanded. "We've done nothing to be ashamed of or afraid for."

By this time Mr. Chessman, the president of the bank, arrived, for he, too, had been notified by telephone from the police station.

"Dodge, what fearful business is this?" panted stout Mr. Chessman, as he entered the counting room.

"A frustrated attempt to rob the bank," replied Mr. Dodge. "There are the two boys whom we found inside."

"How did they come to be inside?" asked Mr. Chessman.

"They tell a very doubtful story, but the officer refuses to arrest them without a formal complaint."

"Then the officer is doing his duty, and very properly," replied Mr. Chessman. "But I am still waiting for details."

"These boys, sir, can tell you all that can be learned here," said the policemen respectfully.

Mr. Chessman turned to them, listening attentively.

"Why, you're two mighty fine lads!" cried Mr. Chessman, grasping a hand of each when he had heard all.

"Yes; if you believe their story," half jeered Mr. Dodge.

"Believe it?" echoed Mr. Chessman. "Of course I do. Prescott and Holmes are straightforward lads. Not at all the kind of stuff out of which robbers are made. I know their fathers, and both are fine straightforward citizens. Besides, such young lads as these—why, it's absurd, Dodge, to connect them with crime."

Mr. Dodge compressed his lips very tightly.

"What's been going on outside?" inquired Dick, in a pause. "Were either of the scoundrels caught?"

"That I don't know," replied the policeman. "I was sent here, to guard the place. Other officers went after the scoundrels. There was some shooting, but whether any one was hurt I don't know."

All hands were destined soon to know, for soon a police party returned to the bank, followed by some citizens. Out in the street was a light express wagon drawn by one horse, and on the floor of this wagon, watched by a policeman, lay Bink, a bullet hole through his right leg.

"We got one of them, Mr. Chessman," called the police chief. "We don't know how many of them there were."

"Two," replied Mr. Chessman, "and a bulldog."

"Oh, we killed the dog," went on the police chief. "The cur fairly flew at me. He tore quite a piece from my trousers, though I didn't give him time to reach my flesh. But how do you know there were two?"

"I have that," replied the bank president, "on the assurance of two boys whom the scoundrels compelled to aid them."

Bink, still under police guard, was sent on to the police station, and a surgeon summoned. The surgeon stopped at the bank on the way to dress the slight cut on Prescott's hand. Then the chief stepped into the bank where, under the electric light, he heard all that Dick and Greg had to tell him. A very full description of the escaped Tim was then taken.

"We'll put all the police of the state on the track of that fellow," growled the chief. "And right now, Prescott and Holmes, I want to tell you that I wish more boys in Gridley were like you. You're good, sound citizens, all the way through, both of you. You did the only thing that it was possible for you to, under the circumstances, and no men could have shown more bravery or presence of mind than you two did."

"The plan was all Dick's," spoke Greg modestly.

"Perhaps it was," assented the police chief. "But you, Holmes, had the sense and the sand

to follow your leader and let him put through what he wanted to do. The credit belongs to you both."

At this moment there came a rapid knocking at the street door. Len Spencer, reporter for the "Morning Blade," was out there, and he naturally wanted to hear all that had been going on.

"I'll get a sore throat, if I have to tell this to many more people," muttered Dick. "Greg, try your hand at it."

"Say, but these two are a corking pair of youngsters," cried Len, as he jotted down the last details of the story.

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Dodge behind one hand.

"I've got to hurry away, chief, to catch my paper," said Len, speeding for the door. "But I shall call up the station later, to learn if you have any more news of this case. Bye-bye, boys! You'll be famous in Gridley by breakfast time!"

So late was the hour that not more than two score of citizens had shown up on the scene of the excitement.

"You'd better be getting home to bed, boys," remarked the chief thoughtfully at last. "And, by hokey! I'd better send word to sound the recall for the searchers who are still out looking

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for you. There are a few men still out, including your fathers."

"Yes; we've got to hurry home," replied Dick, turning to his chum. "Greg, we've kept our mothers worrying about long enough. Let's go on the run."

"If I had had my way," grumbled the bank's vice-president, looking after the vanishing boys, "I'd have——"

"Better not say it, Dodge," interrupted Mr. Chessman brusquely. "It wouldn't sound grateful. Prescott and Holmes have very likely saved us the thirty thousand dollars in our vault."

As Dick and Greg sped away they beheld, down the side street, the horses and the load of hay still standing where Tim had first left them.

Just as Dick and Greg parted with a hasty "good night," they heard the recall of searchers sound on the fire alarm.

As Dick neared his home he saw the store lighted as in business hours. As Dick tried the latch of the store door, his mother, red eyed and worn looking from anxiety, came running to meet him.

"Oh, my boy!" was all she could gasp, and threw her arms around him.

Then, very naturally, the Grammar School

boy had to risk sore throat once more by relating to his mother all that had happened.

"Now, you'd better get right to bed, son," counseled Mrs. Prescott. "You must be worn out for lack of sleep."

"Of course I'll go to bed, mother, if you command it, but not otherwise. I want to be up when Dad comes home."

Three quarters of an hour later Mr. Prescott hurried into the store. He had halted long enough on Main Street to get an inkling of the story.

"Is Dick safe in bed, wife?" Mr. Prescott called eagerly.

Dick's mother pointed to where their son, asleep in a chair, had thrown his head forward on his arms. Tired nature had asserted herself.

CHAPTER XI

GREEN ENVY STALKS AT SCHOOL

THE next day Dick broke his usual habit on Sundays. He did not go either to church or Sunday school.

"I don't want to," he told his parents. "I'll get tired of having to tell the story over and over again. All the fellows will want to know all about what happened, and I'm sick of talking about it."

However, Dick made one exception, and that was when Tom and Dave, Dan and Harry, arrived and insisted on hearing it all. Fortunately Greg came in time to do some of the talking.

"We were certainly some rattled yesterday," laughed Dave, "when we got back to Gridley and found out that you hadn't been back in town at all."

"But right away we had a glimmering of a suspicion as to what had really happened," added Tom. "We routed up all the fellows we could find on Main Street, and the Grammar School boys were out hours ahead of the grown-up searching party that started out at seven o'clock last night."

"Gracious! Won't you two have the crowd after you at school to-morrow!" cried Hazelton almost enviously.

"I'm afraid so," sighed Dick.

"I'm sure of it," groaned Greg Holmes.

Tim's valise had been found by the police. It contained drills and other tools, besides a supply of nitro-glycerine for blowing off the lock on the door of the bank vault.

Tim still remained safe. Bink, under police guard, was getting along all right, his wound not being a serious one. Yet not a word could the police extract from Bink, save when he denounced the "treachery" of the boys and threatened to get even.

"But he won't get even," declared the police chief to Mr. Prescott. "At least, not for years to come, for he'll soon be away where the public will be safe from him."

"The other rascal is at large, though," said Mr. Prescott rather uneasily.

"Yes; but you may be sure that he's a long way from Gridley by this time. Anyway, he'll probably be caught within a day or two, and then it will be behind the bars for him, too."

Up to Monday morning, however, no word came of Tim's capture. It was generally believed that the police had come very close to getting in touch with Tim when he fled on that

Saturday night. The common opinion was that Tim had set the bull-dog to watch, and then had fled swiftly off in the dark. In this respect the quieter scoundrel, Bink, had displayed more bravery, for he had been shot while trying to drive back the police pursuit.

Twenty minutes before the time to go into school, that Monday morning, the school yard at the Central Grammar contained nearly all the pupils of that school. All had come early, with the hero-worshiping instinct, to share in receiving Dick and Greg.

"Oh, it's all stuff and nonsense," declared Ben Alvord sourly to a knot of boys. "If Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes were in that bank, then they were there by their own choice, and they hoped to get some of the money that was to be stolen."

"Tell that to the marines, Ben!" advised Wrecker Lane.

"Then, when the scheme fell through, and the police were on the spot," Ben went on, "of course that pair of kids pretended that they had been working all along to save the bank. You just wait until the prisoner the police have confesses. Then the town will know just what part Dick and Greg really did play."

"Do you know what ails you, Ben?" called Wrecker Lane.

"What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said, Ben. Do you know what ails you?"

"What?"

"You're such a sorehead, and you hate Dick Prescott so, you can't see straight."

"Don't you dare talk to me like that," ordered Alvord angrily.

"Alvord, if you can't find anything better to do than to 'knock' two of the best fellows in the school, then you'd better stop coming to Central Grammar," advised Toby Ross.

"You haven't always been struck on that pair yourself," taunted Ben.

"If I haven't," retorted Toby, flushing, "then at least I claim credit for being bright enough to change my mind when I see good reason for changing it."

"Oh, say, fellows," protested Ben, "let's move away from this crowd of softies who think that Dick Prescott is the only fellow who goes to school here. Come along!"

Ben stalked away, but no one followed him. Ned Allen was still too angry over the happenings of Saturday forenoon.

"Come on, fellows!" Ben called rather anxiously over his shoulder. "Let's get away from the Prescott softies."

"Clear out and enjoy yourself, Alvord,"

mooked Wrecker. "Hold on, though. There's one fellow here that you can have."

"Who?" chorused a dozen schoolboys at once.

"Here's Hen Dutcher," Wrecker Lane went on. "He doesn't belong in our crowd. No one here wants him. Let him go over and start a new crowd with Ben."

"You can keep him," Alvord growled back. "I don't want Hen."

"We don't want him here, either," protested several voices. "Hen, get over to your chum Alvord."

"You fellows lemme alone!" snarled Dutcher.

"Get over there with Ben."

"I don't want anything to do with Alvord," remonstrated Hen.

"I don't want Hen," Ben insisted.

"Get over there, Hen," insisted Toby Ross, pushing the unpopular boy. "You and Ben were good enough chums Saturday. Why should you hate each other to-day?"

Hen was started on a run, and, seeing nowhere else to go, he headed for the fence corner that Alvord had chosen.

"Ned Allen better go over with them, too," cried Spoff Henderson.

"See here, you pirates!" uttered Ned angrily. "If you fellows don't want me here, I'll get out

of the way. But I won't go near Ben Alvord, or have anything to do with him."

Saying this, Ned turned moodily, stalking toward the entrance to the school building.

"What on earth can be keeping Dick and Greg?" became the general inquiry, as several schoolboy watches showed the time to be five minutes before nine.

Over on the girls' side of the yard, though the inquiry was carried on more quietly, there was the same eager desire to behold the two heroes of the Saturday-night adventure.

"None of Prescott's crowd are here," muttered Lane plaintively.

"They're all together, wherever they are," hinted Henderson. "Why don't they hurry up?"

"Here they come!" called Hoof Sadby at last.

"The whole six of 'em," added another.

Around the nearest corner Dick & Co. appeared, coming slowly along. In an instant a big cheer went up from the boys assembled in the school yard. Then a rush was started over the school fence. The girls waved their handkerchiefs.

"Clang! clang! The gong was ringing now, forcing the expedition of hero-worshippers back into the yard, for the line was forming.

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So Dick and Greg escaped the planned reception for that morning. At recess, however, there was no escaping. Prescott and Holmes had to make the best of it, telling over again the story of what had happened to them in the woods, and in Gridley afterwards.

"Huh! Some fellows will swallow any kind of a yarn," snarled Ben Alvord to the only one who would listen to him.

"I'd like to hear it all, if the fellows would only let me get close enough," said Hen Dutcher wistfully. "Do you know, I'm inclined to believe a good deal of what Dick and Greg have told? Of course, I don't believe all the fancy trimmings about their being so cool and brave."

"I don't believe a single word of it," retorted Ben Alvord, with ugly emphasis. "I've never seen anything in that pair to make me believe such a wild yarn about them. Dick Prescott is getting an enlarged head. That's all that ails him."

That the directors of the bank, however, took a very different view of the matter was evident when, at their daily meeting, that forenoon, they voted a reward of two hundred dollars each to Dick and Greg for their coolness and grit in saving the bank's funds.

The news traveled rapidly over the town. Ned Allen, his face hot and eyes bulging, came run-

ning back to the afternoon session of school. As Ned ran up to one group, the boys turned their backs upon him.

"Huh!" muttered Ned, stopping short. Then he started for another and larger group. But here he met the same reception, followed by a curt declaration from Spoff Henderson:

"Your room is better'n your company."

White-faced, now, Ned turned. A hundred feet away he espied Ben Alvord and Hen Dutcher talking in undertones.

"Say," blurted Ned, running up to this pair, "did you hear what happened to Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes?"

"Their heads blew up and burst?" queried Ben hopefully.

"They got arrested for their part of the work at the bank?" asked young Dutcher.

"Nothing at all like it," returned Ned, fairly boiling over with his news. "The directors have rewarded each boy with a present of two hundred dollars."

"It isn't true!" exploded Ben, green with envy.

"All right, if you think you know," grunted Ned. "But it's true, just the same. Every one on Main Street is talking about it."

"Say, it can't be true," urged Hen.

"But it is," declared Ned. "Besides, my uncle

is a depositor at the bank, and one of the directors told him. So, now!"

"I hope their parents make 'em put it all away in bank, and don't allow either Dick or Greg to spend a penny of it," growled Ben vindictively.

On the next day, however, both the schoolboys and their parents had still stranger news to discuss. Both Mr. Prescott and Mr. Holmes had refused, point-blank, to allow their sons to accept the rewards, or any part thereof.

"No citizen should be rewarded, just for being a good citizen," Mr. Prescott declared, and Mr. Holmes stood with him on this platform. "It would be as sensible to reward an office holder for being honest, or a soldier for being brave, a clergyman for being good. It is enough for me to know that my son has been brave in doing right, and enough for my son to know that the community honors him for it."

"Well, what do you think of that?" gasped Ned, as he and Ben talked it over.

"I wish some one would offer me two hundred dollars," muttered Ben Alvord thickly.

Look at that trio," remarked Spoff, scoffingly, nodding his head in the direction of Ben, Ned and Hen. "Birds of a feather, you know. I wish they didn't go to Central Grammar at all. North Grammar would be about their style."

"Humph!" remarked Wrecker Lane. "That's an insult to the North Grammar. I'll tell you where that trio ought to be sent. They ought to be transferred to the Haunted School."

"It would stop being haunted, then," grinned Dan Dalzell, joining the group just at this moment. "The ghosts would decline to associate with such company."

"I wonder how the Haunted School ever got that name?" mused Greg.

"Don't you know?" demanded another boy, with a superior air. "Why, just because it is haunted. It used to be, years ago, and lots of folks got near enough at night to see the ghosts. And now the place is haunted again."

"Bosh!" uttered Dick quietly.

"Don't you believe in ghosts?" demanded Eben Christy, turning on him.

"I certainly don't," Dick declared.

"Then I hope, some night, you really run into the ghosts at the Haunted School," retorted Christy.

"I hope I do," Dick assented quietly.

CHAPTER XII

THE PLACE THAT WAS "CREEPY"

"WE ought to have a most interesting exhibit in botany," said Old Dut, glancing around the schoolroom Friday afternoon. "Some of our young ladies have agreed to bring in on Monday pressed specimens of wild and cultivated flowers. Masters Denton, Gray and Anderson have agreed to bring in specimens of certain common herbs, and Master Watts is going to bring in an assortment of seeds, both of flowering plants and vegetables. But there is one other collection I would like to secure. The country around Gridley is famous for the number of fine old oaks. Won't one set of boys agree to put in a few hours, to-morrow, securing for us the leaves of as many different species of oak trees as possible. Who will volunteer?"

Dick Prescott's hand rose.

"You, Master Prescott?" asked Old Dut.

"My chums and I spend all our spare time in the woods, these days, sir. We may as well keep our eyes open, to-morrow, for leaves of the different species of oak."

"I shall be much obliged to you, if you will do

that for the common good," replied the principal. "If the pupils of this class will bring in enough and fine enough botanical specimens, we will spend one afternoon in June in mounting all the specimens in a form that will make them suitable for an exhibit in Exhibition Hall on Graduation Day."

Then, after a moment in which he appeared to have been thinking of something else, Old Dut suddenly launched this question:

"Master Prescott, how many species of oak have you noticed in the woods around Gridley?"

"Seven, I think, sir," Dick answered, without hesitation.

"Can you name them?"

Dick did so, with very little hesitation.

"Wandering through the woods is a favorite pastime with boys," the principal went on. "Some boys, in the woods, get nothing but tears in their clothing. Others can actually trail knowledge, as well as fun, through the woods. I am inclined to the belief that Master Prescott and some of his friends have actually seen and noticed the seven species of oak that Master Prescott has just named for us. On Monday we shall know."

"Prescott was just throwing a bluff," whispered Ben Alvord to Ned Allen.

"Master Alvord was whispering, just now, I

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believe?" asked Old Dut, turning to the offender.

Ben nodded sulkily.

"Master Alvord wins ten demerits, and will therefore remain after school for forty-five minutes this afternoon. In order that he may be profitably employed during that time Master Alvord will write the word 'whisper' four hundred and fifty times."

The desk-bell sounded for attention. Immediately after boys and girls filed out for the afternoon recess.

"Say, why did you want to let us in for that lumbering trip to-morrow?" inquired Dan almost resentfully.

"Meaning the promise to bring back different kinds of oak leaves?" Dick questioned.

"Yes."

"Why, I did it on the general theory that, once in a while, it doesn't do Grammar School boys any harm to make a noise like study," Prescott laughed.

"But we were going out for fun to-morrow," complained Dalzell.

"Well, isn't it fun to know a little more than some other folks know? Besides, what do we trail through the woods for? To make ourselves stronger than stay-in-the-house boys, eh? Don't you think, Danny Grin, that we'll find a lot of

exercise in tramping miles and climbing a lot of oak trees?"

"It will be a good sport, and put a bit of knowledge in our heads besides," chimed in Tom.

"I'll tell you the feature of your promise, Dick, that Dan objects to," smiled Dave Dar-
rin. "Danny doesn't mind climbing trees, or walking mile after mile, as long as it is all use-
less and without a purpose. But it stings Danny
Grin to have to do anything that's useful."

"Now, will you be good, Danny Grin?" de-
manded Greg Holmes.

"When you hear my character, assailed in
that fashion, Dick, what do you say?" appealed
Dan solemnly.

"What do I say?" echoed Prescott. "Um!
Let me see. I believe I'll say what the man on
the clubhouse steps said."

"Hands up!" ordered Hazelton, getting in
front of Dick and aiming a forefinger at his nose.
"Ever since last winter you've been stinging us
with curiosity as to what the man on the club-
house steps really did say. And you're the only
one who knows. Stand to deliver. What did
the man on the clubhouse steps say?"

"As I've assured you before," Prescott an-
swered gravely, "that's a secret."

"When are you going to tell us the secret?"
pressed Harry.

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"When I feel that I have a right to," Dick replied. "Surely, you fellows don't want me to betray a confidence, and then have to put in my days and nights repenting?"

Eight o'clock Saturday morning found Dick & Co. assembled at the appointed corner on Main Street.

"My mother wasn't going to let me go," remarked Dan. "She was afraid of my trailing through the woods, after what happened to two of us last Saturday. But I told mother that we're under orders to find and bring in oak-leaf specimens when we go to school Monday. That sounded different, so mother let me go after all."

"There was a little doubt at our house about letting me go," smiled Dick. "But dad and mother both gave in when they heard about the oak leaves we were assigned to find and bring in. It made a lot of difference when school work was mentioned. Fellows, perhaps that was what I had in mind when I offered yesterday."

"I'll wager you had that all thought out," laughed Tom Reade.

"Let's get started," proposed Dave, "or some one's mother may hurry up and draw one of us out of the crowd, anyway. Let's go while the permission holds good."

As soon as they had left the busier streets behind, a jog trot was started. However, the run did not last as long as usual, for each boy carried weight in the form of a parcel of food to be used at noon time.

"Don't any fellows get to wandering off from the rest to-day," urged Dick, as soon as the six had slowed down to a walk. "Together, we can put up a few pounds of fight, if we run into any one like Tim. One of us, away from the crowd, might just possibly find more trouble than he could handle."

To-day Dick & Co. did not travel by way of Norton's woods, but, instead, out on the road to Stayton. They came to where the road on each side was bordered by deep woods. Half a mile further on they came to a little clearing. Suddenly they halted, looking ahead curiously.

"There's the Haunted Schoolhouse we were talking about the other day," announced Tom.

"Queer stories some of the farmers bring in about the ghosts being seen and heard there again," said Darrin.

"It's strange how foolish some people can be about such things," added Greg.

"I remember we were all of us foolish, that way, one night last winter," smiled Dick.

"But we didn't any of us believe in ghosts," protested Dan.

"No; we didn't believe in ghosts, of course not," admitted Dick. "At the same time I think each of us had a shivery feeling that we didn't want any evidence offered that we were wrong."

"Oh, well, what are we stopping for now?" questioned Tom. "Surely we're not afraid to pass the Haunted School in daytime. Not even the most ignorant people believe that ghosts can do business in broad daylight."

Thus admonished, Dick & Co. strolled on past the place of gruesome repute. Each one of the boys stared curiously at the dilapidated old building in passing.

The schoolhouse itself had not been used as such in the last twenty years. Built in older days, it was still a fairly substantial little structure in spite of long neglect. Up to twenty years before the farmers of the neighborhood had used it as a district school. In time, however, these same farmers realized that their children could get a better education in the larger and better equipped schools in Gridley. So the old district school had been closed, and the building left to acquire a grisly reputation for itself.

"Authorities" differed as to how the schoolhouse came to be haunted. There was the usual assortment of yarns of mysterious murders, misers' suicides and heartbroken maidens to account for the haunting of the building.

Another yarn was to the effect that the last schoolmaster, desolate over the final closing of his school, died of a broken heart. Thereafter, once in every two or three years, the late schoolmaster's ghost, according to some accounts, returned and woefully rang the bell that still hung in the little cupola, with a ghostly notion of summoning back his departed pupils. Certain it was that many people living in the neighborhood had heard the ghostly tolling of the bell by night. Some daring citizens had even tried to trap the "ghost" at its work, and afterwards reported, in awed tones, that they had seen the bell ringing, yet with no visible hand on the frayed old bell rope.

"I wonder why nobody ever thought to take the old bell out of the cupola," asked Tom. "That would stop the nonsense."

"We'll appoint you a committee of one to come up to-night and take the bell out," suggested Darrin dryly.

"Probably no one would think of prosecuting you for stealing it," smiled Dick.

"What do you say, Dave? Will you come up with me to-night and take the old bell away?" pressed Tom.

"Nothing doing," was Darrin's brief response.

"What do you say, Dick?"

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"Just what the man on the clubhouse steps said."

"I think the man on the clubhouse steps was a ghost, too," snorted Tom.

"Maybe he was," Dick conceded.

"My blood has been going cold with the creeps. Let's try another run," urged Hazelton. "Set the pace, Dick."

Away the six went at an easy jog that continued for fully half a mile. Then, after another walk, the Grammar School boys came to a field that proved to be well suited to running.

"Sprints to-day?" asked Dave.

"Yes; to warm up. But what do you all say if we also measure off for four hundred and forty yards to-day?" Dick suggested.

"It will be a lot of work to lay off a four hundred and forty yard course," replied Tom, throwing off his coat. "Let's get on the job at once."

After a while, however, the course was marked. First of all each boy did an excellent hundred-yard dash, though not for timing. Then the four-hundred-and-forty was attempted, three youngsters running at a time.

"We're improving finely over the longer course," Dick nodded, as he glanced down the recorded times. "One more quarter-mile apiece, and we will be hungry enough for lunch."

"I'm always hungry enough for that," grunted Hazelton. "In fact, I'm willing to eat first and run bimeby."

"Glutton!" called Darrin scornfully.

"Pig!" supplemented Tom.

"Well, why can't we do the rest of the running this afternoon?" Harry demanded.

"On a full stomach?" smiled Dick. "Besides, we do our best work just before a meal."

"Whew, but it's warm to-day!" muttered Dave, mopping himself after completing the next quarter. "Dick, if we keep this running up many days longer we've got to find a running field at the edge of a pond or river. I'd like to go in right now."

"Too early," objected Prescott wisely. "Walk around slowly, and cool yourself in that way."

Hazelton was already busy undoing the parcels of food and spreading out the contents.

"I had a dream last night," remarked Tom dryly. "I dreamed that we were out just like this, and that we had a wonderfully fine feed. Turkey, jams, pies, fruits——"

Hazelton, his mouth watering, looked up from his self-imposed task.

"Did we all seem to enjoy it—in your dream?" Dick inquired.

"All but Harry Hazelton," sniffed Tom. "I

dreamed that he went off to pick some May flowers and forgot all about the lunch. After we'd eaten every scrap of it we saw Harry come loitering along. When Harry found there was no food left he sat down and looked really cheerful. Said he didn't care much about eating, anyway."

"Some folks do spend their sleeping time in going through the biggest sort of fool dreams," sniffed Harry.

The luncheon turned out to be a most generous one, even for six hungry boys. After they had eaten it all none of them felt like stirring from the grass for the time being.

"Any of you fellows been reading anything good, lately?" inquired Tom, and that started all hands to telling stories. Thus another hour slipped by.

"And now we'd better be hustling," proposed Dick, springing up from the ground. "We mustn't forget that we've promised to collect all the different kinds of oak leaves we can find to-day."

"I move," suggested Greg, "that we appoint Harry a committee of one, to go off by himself and gather oak leaves for the whole crowd."

"I don't know an oak from a family tree," objected Hazelton. "Let Dan do it."

"I'd certainly prefer to stay here on the grass

and go to sleep," muttered Tom. "This fine, warm air makes a fellow drowsy."

"I could take a nap, too," agreed Dan. Dave Darrin began to gape. Dick surveyed the crowd keenly before he said:

"All the signs point to the idea that we'd better get in motion fast. We don't want to go into school Monday morning and admit to Old Dut that we couldn't be trusted with a very small commission."

"Small commission? Tiny errand?" protested Hazelton. "Why, if we're going to find a lot of different species of oaks, then we've got to tramp miles this afternoon."

"All the more reason for starting at once," Dick insisted. "Besides, think of the magnificent appetites we'll have for supper."

"Nothing at our house for supper but bread and butter, jam and tea," muttered Dan woe-fully. "Dick, I'm sorry you were so foolish as to make that promise to Old Dut."

"Having made it I've got to keep it, whether you fellows do or not," young Prescott retorted. "Anyone coming with me?"

"What did the man on the clubhouse steps say?" broke in Greg. "Tell us that, Dick, and we'll go with you."

The other boys looked up expectantly at this. Perhaps they could corner their young leader

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into telling the "secret." But Dick shook his head.

"If you fellows don't get along promptly with me now, I'll never tell you what the man on the clubhouse steps said."

Dick started down the road, Dave following. Then Tom and Greg fell into line and that started Harry and Dan.

It was a busy afternoon. Two hours passed before the boys had leaves of five different species of oaks. After another hour and a half they found two more.

"There's an eighth," Dick informed them. "As yet we haven't found a scarlet oak. That's one of the very common oaks, and we don't want to go back stumped for a specimen."

"This is getting to be a bore," complained Dan, whose feet were growing weary.

"We'll give it up, now, if you want, Dan," proposed Dick.

"I'll tell you what we can do. We can work along homeward, and keep our eyes peeled for a sight of a scarlet oak. I don't want to go back stumped for scarlet oak leaves, either," Dan muttered.

So that plan was followed. Barely a quarter of a mile had they proceeded along the road when Hazelton discovered what he believed to be a scarlet oak tree up on a hillside.

"We'll make a break for it," sighed Dick, who felt greatly pleased that they were not to be stumped for what was commonly an easy kind of tree to find.

Once under the tree, however, they found that none of the limbs trailed low enough for them to reach leaves from the ground.

"It's my tree," proclaimed Harry. "I found it. I claim the right to do the climbing."

Off came his coat and up the stout trunk Hazelton started.

"Now you're up there," Dave called, "you might as well go higher Harry. You'll get choicer leaves further up."

"All right," came from among the boughs. Presently a lot of twigs, bearing leaves, came fluttering down to the ground.

"Look these leaves over, Dick. See if they'll do," came from well up in the tree.

"Some of them are fine," agreed Prescott. "Come down, Harry."

Hazelton started to descend. Suddenly those below heard a muffled yell. Then something plunged through the air. Harry's body struck one of the lower limbs, glanced and next struck the ground, falling partly on his right shoulder.

"Why doesn't he speak or move?" cried Dave, darting forward. "Gracious! Is Harry's neck broken?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE GRUESOME NIGHT SOUND

DICK, white-faced, was kneeling beside the injured boy in an instant.

"Whew! That was a fearful tumble!" exclaimed Tom, his voice shaking. "Somebody had better run for a doctor. Shall I?"

"Not yet," Dick answered, in a low voice. "You can't find one, nearer than Gridley. Wait until we see if Harry is going to come to."

Dick felt for Hazelton's pulse, though it was a trick at which he had not had much practice.

"Is it beating?" asked Darrin, in an awed voice.

"I—I think so," Dick answered unsteadily. "But don't any one talk for a minute. I want to listen."

Harry's face was as white as it could be. To the scared boys looking on there was no sign of breathing.

"This is a fearful ending to a jolly day," muttered Greg, dashing a tear away from one eye.

"The—the pulse is going——" Dick began.

"Hurrah!" almost sobbed Tom.

"But it's going so faintly that one can hardly be sure. Has any one a pocket mirror?"

Dan produced an old and battered one, but the little disk of glass was intact. Dick took this, polishing it with his handkerchief, then holding the glass surface over Harry's parted lips.

After a moment Prescott held the mirror up, examining it.

"Here's moisture," he announced unsteadily. "So Harry is breathing."

"Gracious, but the way he looks he'll stop breathing at any moment," gasped Dave.

"Don't," protested Dan, shakily.

"The pulse is—still beating," Dick went on, after a pause.

"Any stronger?" Dave wanted to know.

"It's hard to say."

Five nonplussed boys looked down at the white face. Not one of them had any real idea of what should be done. This sort of thing was wholly new to them.

"I guess we'll have to get the doctor," proposed Tom again.

"We can't lose the time needed to run into Gridley," Dick objected. "Has any one in the crowd any money?"

None had.

"I wonder if Harry had any money in his pocket?" pondered Dick.

"No," declared Tom positively. "What do you want money for, anyway?"

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"To pay the cost of a telephone charge from the nearest house," Prescott explained. "We ought to telephone, and get Dr. Bentley to come out here with his car and take Harry home."

"I'll dead beat a call on some farmer," declared Reade.

"Sometimes that's harder than you might think," Dick replied, with a shake of his head. "Farmers have good reason, I guess, to be suspicious about boys' jokes. They might think this was a prank."

"Some farmer could hitch up and take Harry home in a wagon," Dave suggested. "Harry's folks would pay the farmer for the trouble."

"That's what we'll have to do," Dick agreed, "unless Harry soon shows signs of coming to."

"His shoulder must be broken," muttered Tom. "Probably his arm, also. Whew! But it was fearful, the way he pounded the ground."

"Why, for a fall, I thought he struck rather lightly," Prescott rejoined.

"If he did, why doesn't the poor chap come to?" Dave demanded.

"Perhaps he will—soon," Dick uttered hopefully. "His pulse is a little stronger, fellows."

That cheered them, and all wanted to feel his pulse at once, but Dick motioned them back.

"Better not, fellows. Too many fellows fussing around Harry would disturb him if he

should open his eyes and know anything. Dave, take the mirror and polish it dry again."

"Why? Do you think he has stopped breathing?" demanded Darrin, as he whipped out his handkerchief and fell at work.

"No; I want to see if his breath is coming any stronger. Yes; it is," he added, after a brief trial with the mirror. "I believe Harry is going to come around all right."

"Poor chap!" groaned Tom. "He'll be laid up a long time with his broken bones."

"It will keep him out of our baseball work this season," Dick said. "Too bad; too bad!"

"I guess I'd better be hiking off after the farmer and the wagon," suggested Tom uneasily.

"Yes; I guess so," Dick admitted. "Hold on, fellows! Harry is opening his eyes!"

That brought Tom Reade back.

"What's the row?" asked Harry faintly.

"How do you feel?" asked Dick.

"All right, I guess. But my shoulder hurts."

"I should think it might," Prescott agreed.

"Did I—er—take a tumble?" asked Harry, in a somewhat stronger voice.

"I rather think you did," Prescott assented.

"You struck glancingly on your right shoulder and rolled over."

"I—I can move my arm," Hazelton asserted, running his right hand up and down his body.

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"Does it hurt?" Dick inquired.

"The hand and arm don't hurt, but the shoulder aches a bit. My head's dizzy, too."

"I'm going off after that wagon," announced Tom. "This young man ought to be at home as soon as he can."

"What wagon?" called Harry.

"The wagon to take you home in," Tom answered, coming back. "I'm going to get the nearest farmer to hitch up and take you home."

"Don't you do anything of the sort," Hazelton objected. "You'll scare my mother to death! She hasn't been well lately, either."

"Do you think you're going to be able to walk home all right?" Dick wanted to know. "It's a long way, Harry, you know."

"Of course I can walk home," retorted Hazelton. "Wait until I get up."

He needed help, but at last Harry was on his feet. He took three or four steps and worked both arms freely. Then his head felt so dizzy that he was glad to sit down on the grass.

"I guess you're all right," cried Dick joyously, "but you've surely got to rest a while before you can do any real walking."

"I think I'd better go after that wagon, at any rate," Tom insisted.

"If you do," blazed Hazelton, "I'll fight you, Tom Reade."

"Oh, well," grunted Tom, "if you're husky enough to fight you're sound enough to walk. That's certain."

The sun had gone down, and now darkness was coming on fast. Dick & Co. should have been nearing home by this time, but to start Harry, just yet, was out of the question. Every few minutes Hazelton got on his feet again and walked a little way. It was plain that he was gradually gaining strength.

"You'll eat a big supper, yet to-night," glowed Tom cheerily.

"Of course I shall," Harry insisted.

Yet it was three-quarters of an hour after dark before the boys thought it wise to make the final start. Even then Dave supported Harry by the latter's left arm. In this fashion they moved down the road, slowly at first, but gradually gaining in speed.

"And now I know I'm all right," laughed Hazelton at last, "for I'm growing so hungry that I'm getting downright peevish about it."

Din-n-n-g! came the solemn sound on the air.

"What's that?" called Dick, halting.

Don-n-ng! came another peal.

"The Haunted School!" gasped Dave.

All six of the boys halted in their tracks. They didn't like to believe in ghosts—but what would you do if one chased you?

CHAPTER XIV

THE PUZZLE OF THE "HAUNTED" SPOT

ON the soft spring air the two peals had left a gentle vibration.

Dick & Co. had come close upon the former schoolhouse without having realized it. Only a gentle bend in the road separated them from the reputed abode of "haunts."

"Let's hurry by it," proposed Dan, but his voice wavered.

"I'd like to investigate the place," muttered Dick.

"So would I," agreed Tom honestly, "but in daylight."

"I'm for looking into the place now, if Harry doesn't mind," spoke up Dave. "We fellows don't believe in ghosts, and we can prove it by finding the cause of that ghostly racket."

"Here's some one coming," hinted Greg. "Hear the sound of hoofs and wheels."

True enough, some vehicle was coming toward them, from the direction of Gridley.

"We can wait until the rig reaches here, and then have a man to help us look," proposed Dan.

So they waited until an oldish-looking buggy, drawn by an antiquated horse, came near them.

"Hold on, mister, please," hailed Dick.

"What do you want, boys?" answered a farmer, apparently about fifty years of age, drawing rein.

"That's the Haunted School down below, sir?" Dick asked.

"Yes; the pesky place!" grunted the farmer.

"The bell just rang twice," Prescott went on.

"It did?" demanded the farmer.

"Yes, sir. And we want to look into the schoolhouse and try to run that alleged ghost down. Won't you come along and help us?"

"Do—*what?*" gasped the man in the buggy.
"Good night!"

Down over the horse's back he brought the whip, with a force that startled the easy-going animal into a mad run. In a twinkling the buggy was out of sight.

"We'll know one brave man, if we ever see him again," muttered Darrin disgustedly.

"We'll have to do our own investigating," Dick resumed. "Let's——"

Here he paused suddenly, for the bell was ringing again. Now the strokes came a little sharper and clearer.

"It's pealing like a funeral knell," whispered Dan considerably awe-struck.

"Yes," Dick nodded. "It has struck three so far. Listen!"

So they listened and counted, until the number of slow peals had reached fourteen. Then there came a lull in the ringing.

"That's as if some one had died who was fourteen years old," announced Tom Reade, in a strained voice.

"And we're each of us fourteen," added Harry.

"Do you think that bell is meant for us?" asked Greg, a creepy feeling passing over him, despite his knowledge that there are no such things as ghosts.

"If it is," retorted Dick, "this is no place for us! I'm so hungry that I want to get home and eat a decent meal before anything happens to me."

"Going to cut and run?" asked Tom.

"No-o-o; I don't believe I am," Prescott answered. "I don't want to get panic-stricken just because a bell is ringing. What do you say, fellows? Shall we go down to the school-house and see if we can find out what's behind this strange game?"

"Of course we'll go," broke in Dave spiritedly. "Boys of our age are not going to allow themselves to be scared by some one's tomfoolery."

"Come along, then," urged Dick, "and let's do our best to solve the mystery that has puzzled and scared so many folks."

"Good!" glowed Dave, who was known as the most reckless member of Dick & Co.

"If we're going at it, let's get through with it," urged Tom, who, though courageous, was not noted for taking unnecessary risks.

The six stepped forward resolutely, now. There is strength in numbers, and courage in the shoulder-touch.

As they came in sight of it, all was quiet near the Haunted School. In fact, the night and the surroundings seemed unnaturally quiet.

"Make a noise, some one," grimaced Greg Holmes.

Ding! dong! ding! As if in answer, three quick, sharp peals sounded on the old bell up in the cupola of the long-deserted building.

"There's your noise, Greg," grinned Dan.

"We'll see if we can put a stop to the performances of that bell," spoke Dick Prescott steadily.

Dick took the lead as the six Grammar School boys marched up to the door of the schoolhouse.

Within and without all was now silent.

The door was locked, when Dick tried it, but the door itself was so old, and the lock so rust-eaten that, when Dave added the weight of his pull to Dick's, the door flew suddenly outward, so unexpectedly that Dick and Dave both fell backward and went to the ground.

"My, but there's steam in the ghostly mule that kicked you," laughed Reade.

Dick and Dave were speedily on their feet.

"Come on! We'll go right inside," Prescott proposed. "We'll see whether there's anything ghostly or ghostly stalking about in here."

In the little hallway the rotting bell rope hung within easy reach. From there the boys went on into the single schoolroom of the old school of long ago.

Instantly there was a sound of light-footed scurrying all over the place.

"Woof!" sputtered Dan, drawing back.

"You simpleton!" laughed Dick. "Don't you know the sound made by rats?"

"Rats?" repeated Dalzell. "Wh-wh-what is there here for rats to live on?"

"There may be something, at that," Darrin argued.

The six had halted, now, in the schoolroom.

"I think there ought to be one of us on guard near the door," ventured Dan.

"All right, Danny Grin," rejoined Dick.

"You go out and stand by the door. And say!"

"Yes!"

"Stand where you can see that the bell-rope isn't monkeyed with."

"I'll do that," agreed Dan, as he started out.

A moment later the bell started.

"Quit that, Danny!" ordered Dave Darrin sharply. "No pranks!"

"I—I—I didn't ring the old bell," sputtered Dan. The accents of truth were in his shaking voice, too.

"Didn't you touch the rope?" pressed Dick.

"Yes; I had my hand on it, but I didn't pull the bell."

"The rope pulled itself, eh?" demanded Darrin ironically.

"Honestly I didn't pull on that bell-rope."

Ding!

"Wo-ow-ow!" wailed Dalzell. "The thing has rung again, and I didn't even have my hand on the rope."

"Did the rope move?" called Dick suspiciously.

"I—I don't know. I didn't see it, of course. It's dark here."

"Let's all go out and watch that bell-rope," proposed Prescott, leading the way.

"Mighty good idea," approved Darrin under his breath. "The key to the whole riddle seems to be tied up in the rope."

"Some one who has a match strike it," ordered Dick.

Tom Reade obeyed, the lucifer shedding a truly ghostly light around that dark, damp, ill-smelling old hallway.

Dick rested his right hand on the rope, studying the line attentively up to the point where it went through the ceiling and into the belfry.

Flare! Tom struck two matches together, and held their light toward the rope.

Dong! sounded the bell overhead.

"Whew!" whistled Dick, feeling, it must be admitted, a strange chill chasing another chill up and down his spine. "Now, I know I didn't pull the rope."

"What made the bell sound, then?" asked Hazelton hurriedly.

"Did you feel the rope move at all?" questioned Reade.

"It didn't move much," Dick replied to the latter speaker. "It didn't really move, but there was a sort of queer vibration to the rope."

Dong!

"There! The rope vibrated again," cried Dick.

"But the rope didn't really move. I saw that," chimed in Dave Darrin.

"Dick, how do you account for it all?" This from Greg Holmes.

"I don't pretend to account for it," Prescott replied evenly. "It can be accounted for. I don't doubt that. Nor do I believe that any invisible spirit rang the bell, either."

"Why not?" challenged Harry Hazelton.

"Simply because I don't believe that spirits move about through space playing such pranks."

"We'll find a real answer to these puzzles," predicted Dave.

"I don't believe I'm curious enough to care," Dan protested. "My supper would look better to me than guessing the answer in a queer old rookery like this."

"But, now we're here," Dick objected, "we may as well go to the root of the matter."

"Woo-oo-oo-oo-oo!" sounded an indescribably uncanny voice. Not one of the six boys could guess the direction from which it came.

"Say, you fellows who like that sort of thing might come back to-night, bring blankets and camp here on the spot," mocked Harry. "As for me, a good supper and a soft bed appeal most of all to me."

"It might not be a bad idea to camp here to-night and to-morrow night, if we can coax permission out of our parents," proposed Dick.

Ding-dong-ding-dong-ding! went the old bell lustily.

"What about supper?" demanded Hazelton. every individual hair on his head standing up.

He had plenty of company in his feeling of marked uneasiness.

CHAPTER XV

THE RED STAINS ADD HORROR

"GIVE me some matches, Tom."

It was Dick Prescott who spoke. Reade handed him a box of safety matches. Armed with these Prescott moved back into the one-time schoolroom.

Dave Darrin was at the heels of his chum. The others, not being invited, did not go.

"Now, what on earth does Dick expect to find in there?" asked Greg curiously, as the four in the hallway watched the tiny flickerings of light in the larger room.

"You fellows come here, if you want to see something," Prescott called softly. Tom and Greg went inside. Dan remained to keep Harry company in the hallway.

"See that?" demanded Dick, pointing with a match that he had just lighted.

"That box? Yes," Tom assented.

"But do you see what's on the box?"

"Bread and a few shreds of meat," Tom continued. "It looks as though it had been a sandwich," proposed Greg jocosely. "If there's a date it will give us a clue to the year in which the sandwich was brought here."

"Take these matches, Tom, and strike another one," directed Dick. Then he bent forward to feel the bread.

"It's not very stale yet," he announced. "At any rate, this bread must have been baked within the week. Fellows, you wanted to know what brought the rats prowling around here. The answer is easy. Food! Now, ghosts don't eat food; at least, I never heard of any that did. This bread means human presence in this place."

Dan and Harry now came in, to join in the investigation.

"Some one who's alive and human has been using this place," Dick went on. "So what is more reasonable than to suppose that the some one is also behind the ghost pranks?"

Rap! rap! rap! sounded on one of the walls of the schoolhouse. It must be admitted that everyone of the young ghost-hunters jumped, but the next instant Dave Darrin darted for the hallway, and thence outdoors. Dick started second, but he was even with Dave when the latter arrived outdoors. Both ran around to the side of the building on which the raps had sounded. They found only the quiet of the night. Not a thing appeared to be stirring, save themselves.

"If our ghost is human, then he must own a pretty good pair of seven-league boots," muttered Dave.

"Oh, it's a human ghost, all right," muttered young Prescott. "Whoever he is, he has planned things pretty well and is spry enough to slip away from us before we can get well started."

Ding! dong! ding! rang the bell solemnly.

"Now, what do you make of that?" demanded Tom Reade, hurrying to join Dick and Dave. "I was standing right beside the rope, but not touching it. Did you see anything out here that would give a clue to the ringing?"

"Not a thing," Prescott admitted, growing more puzzled.

"And I stood right here," confessed Darrin, looking up at the cupola. It's all open, up there, as you see. If there had been anyone up there, ringing the bell, I'd have seen him, surely."

"You fellows may be as curious as you like," muttered Hazelton, joining them, "but I'm thinking of my supper."

"Bring the matches, Tom," requested Dick. "I'm going to poke through this little bit of woods. We may find something in there that will help to post us."

Dick started ahead, with Tom at his heels, ready to light a match when ordered. Dave came third.

In Indian file they moved slowly along a narrow, somewhat crooked path.

Of a sudden, as he passed between two slim young trees, Dick's hat flew off.

"Who did that?" he demanded, halting and turning.

"Not I," Tom protested.

"No; he didn't," confirmed Dave, "for I was looking——"

Dave's further explanation was cut short by a hasty, startled "Woof!" from Tom.

For Reade's hat had been struck from his head just as mysteriously as Dick's had been.

And now, as Dave Darrin hurried forward, his hat, too, left his head.

"If you want a mystery to guess about," proclaimed Reade dryly, "there's one that's worth the full price. Who put my sky-piece on the run?"

"Who put mine?" insisted Dave, running to the trees and peering around them.

"The trees are not big enough to conceal any human being hiding behind them," remarked Dick. "You may as well spare yourself the trouble, Darry, of trying to find anyone behind a tree."

"If there had been any one," admitted Darrin, "I'd have seen him, for I was behind you two when you lost your bonnets."

Dave picked up the three hats and joined his friends. All three covered.

"Well, let's go a little further into the woods," Dick proposed. They went, but nothing came of the search. By another little path they returned to the schoolhouse to find Greg, Dan and Harry all standing in the middle of the road.

"What ails you three? Getting nervous?" smiled Dick.

"No-o-o-o," replied Holmes slowly; "but we thought that we preferred being out in the open. What did you discover?"

"One more mystery, without the key," Darrin growled. Then he told about the mysterious knocking off of their hats.

Bang! came a crash from the woods that Dick, Dave and Tom had just left. All six of the boys jumped in earnest. There was nothing unreal about that noise, for it was unmistakably the report of a pistol.

"Oh! oh! oh!" wailed a sepulchral voice. "You shot me!"

"I meant to," answered a gruffer voice.

Hair standing up, it must be confessed, and gooseflesh pimpling their bodies, six boys oppressed by a sense of horror stood rooted to the spot for a few moments.

"What was it?" gasped Dan at last.

"A shot," replied Darrin tersely, though he spoke in a very low tone.

"But the calls?" queried Greg.

"You all heard what was said," Dick replied. His voice was steady, though it sounded strange in Prescott's own ears.

"It's time we were getting home," proposed Harry, in a creepy voice.

"No," retorted Dick, in a resolute voice. "It's time we began to do some looking about."

"Let's do it on Main Street in Gridley, then," suggested Dalzell eagerly.

"We'll do it right here," rejoined Prescott. "Tom, your matches?"

Taking the box, Dick turned and started into the woods for the point from which the sound of the shot had appeared to come. Dave stepped to his side and went with him, Tom keeping at their heels. Then the other three Grammar School boys, feeling somewhat ashamed, followed, too.

When he thought himself near the right spot Dick struck a match and began to scan the ground. The light of the first two matches revealed nothing to his prying eyes, but with the third it was different. He stopped suddenly, bending close to the ground and holding the light there.

"Great Scott!" he gasped, striking another match. "Fellows, don't crowd in too closely—but look!"

Cries of dismayed astonishment came from all of the boys. On the ground were two distinct little pools of red. The leaves on two bushes right at hand were spattered with the same fluid.

"Blood!" quaked Harry.

"Oh, say!" breathed Dan. "This thing is growing too fierce. This is no place to be playing in. There's wicked work afloat to-night. Let's beat the best time ever made between here and Gridley."

"I don't want to sneak away," suggested Tom. "I'm not going to show the white feather, either. But now it's plain that a crime has been committed here. It's our duty to notify the authorities in Gridley."

"We've one other duty that is even stronger," asserted Dick Prescott, looking at the others in the darkness as the match between his fingers burned down and out.

"Name it," begged Greg.

"If any one has been shot here—and how can we doubt it?—then our first duty is to find the wounded one and see whether we can help him. Hello, there! Whoever you are, do you need a friend?"

No answer came. Dick called out again, but still without result.

"You see," broke in Hazelton tremulously tri-

umphant, "there's no wounded person around here."

"Account for this blood, then," challenged Dick.

Hazelton opened his mouth, but closed it again without speaking.

"If there isn't a wounded man," declared Darrin staunchly, "then there must be a fainting or a dead man. Dick's right. It is our duty to search about here and see if we can offer any aid to a suffering human being. Wounded man, or dead man, we must find him."

"There ought to be a trail of blood to follow," hinted Dick, taking out another match. "Come! We'll try to follow the trail from this point."

"The supper trail is calling," murmured Harry in a sad aside to Dan Dalzell.

"You're a marvel, Harry!" muttered Greg Holmes.

"Why?"

"An hour or so ago we were wondering if you were dead. Now you're yelling for the cook."

"It isn't his stomach, Greg," Dan found chance to whisper a moment later. "Hazelton doesn't like our surroundings any better than I do. Ugh! This shooting and the bloodstains are enough to give any fellow the cold creeps!"

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"It doesn't seem to affect them that way," murmured Greg, nodding toward Dick, Dave and Tom, who, lighting matches as they went, were trying to follow the trail of red.

"Hang it, but this is the strangest thing I ever saw," protested Dick a few minutes later.

"What is?" asked Greg. "The trail?"

"There isn't any trail. That's the queer part. Except for that one spot we can't find any blood-stains."

"Let's go back there," proposed Dave, "and see if the stains are still there."

They were. The boys plucked more than a dozen leaves on which the red blotches were now rapidly drying.

"Well, what are we going to do now?" Tom asked, with as much interest as though he were discussing a problem in arithmetic, of which study he was very fond.

"I think we'd better go to town and tell what we've seen," proposed Dick Prescott.

"And be voted first-class liars," muttered Dave.

"Come on, anyway," Dick added.

"If nothing happens that stops us from getting away from here," muttered Tom Reade dubiously.

CHAPTER XVI

OLD DUT MAKES A FIND

“WELL, we got away safely,” announced Dick two minutes later, as the Grammar School boys, now realizing how late they were for supper, kept on at a jog down the road.

“Me?” muttered Hazelton, with a fine disregard for grammar. “I believe in letting well enough alone. I’m going to keep away from that has-been schoolhouse after this.”

“All right, then,” Prescott agreed. “But I imagine that the rest of us will be out this way again to-morrow afternoon.”

When Dick reached home his mother was inclined to scold a bit over his delayed evening meal. When Prescott’s parents, however, heard what the boys had been through they opened their eyes very wide.

“You shouldn’t have remained a moment after you heard that shot fired and found the blood,” Mr. Prescott remarked rather severely.

“We didn’t stay long after that, Dad,” Dick replied. “But did you ever hear of anything stranger?”

“It certainly was strange enough,” Mr. Pres-

cott answered. Then, after a significant look at his wife he put on his hat and left the store.

Within ten minutes Mr. Prescott was back, bringing with him the police chief. With them was also Len Spencer, for that local reporter had been at the station house when Mr. Prescott called.

"What's this murder mystery, Dick?" questioned Len at once.

"It's all murder and no mystery, I guess," laughed Dick. "All we could find was the blood, and no trail leading anywhere."

"Ugh!" muttered Len, as Dick went on with the story. "It's all grisly enough. What do you think, chief?"

"It doesn't look unlike a hoax by boys," murmured the police official.

"Sir," replied Mr. Prescott rather indignantly, "My son is a truthful boy."

"You may take it from me, chief, that Dick Prescott wouldn't string any one on so serious a subject. Besides, they have seen the leaves, spotted with dried blood," added Len Spencer.

"Which boy in your crowd cut his finger?" asked the chief, turning suddenly on Dick.

"None of us, sir, as far as I know," young Prescott answered.

"You can get bloodstains from a cut finger, you know," the chief observed.

"But I've been telling you the exact truth about this business, sir," Dick protested. "You can ask any of the other fellows that were with me."

"I know what I'm going to do, chief," Len went on briskly. "I'm going to get a horse and buggy and drive out to that place. As it's such a creepy spot, I'll be obliged for your company, if you care to go."

"I think I'd better go," nodded the chief. "Bring your buggy around to the station house and I'll have two dark-lanterns ready."

Sunday morning's "Blade" carried a first-page story about the Haunted School that filled Gridley people with wonder. Len Spencer described the latest news from that weird spot with all the fervor of the skilled reporter. He told the whole story as related by Dick, and also recounted his own visit with the chief of police. But there was at yet no answer to the puzzle.

That Sunday a few of the bolder ones went out in groups to the Haunted School and poked fearsomely about. Nothing was found, however, to throw any light on the question.

"Dick," called his mother as the young man returned from Sunday school, "I wish you'd kindle a fire in the range."

Dick set about his task. When he had cleaned out the grate and had laid some paper over the

grate he picked up a stick of wood, whittling shavings to lay under the wood.

"Ouch!" he muttered soon, and held up a finger that he had cut slightly. Then, with a sudden thought, he ran to his own room, where he left some of the red-spotted leaves brought home the night before.

A drop or two of his blood Dick let fall on one of the stained leaves.

"Queer!" he muttered, holding up the leaf. "Both spots are red, but they're different shades and look altogether different. I wonder what it means."

Leaving the second spot to dry on the leaf, Dick found a bit of rag, bound up his cut finger and went on with his task of building the fire.

By the time that he was through the blood had dried on the leaf. Dick again studied the difference between the two spots. Then he took the leaf to his father.

"The spots certainly are different," assented Mr. Prescott. "I think you may be on the track of a real clue. I wish we knew some one who really understands examining blood."

"Old Dut has a microscope, and is a crank over it," Dick suggested.

"Old—who?" demanded the boy's father.

"Mr. Jones, our principal. We always call him Old Dut."

"Don't let me hear you call him that again," commanded Mr. Prescott. "But do you think Mr. Jones and his microscope could throw any light on this matter of the spots?"

"I'm almost certain of it, sir."

"After luncheon we'll go around and see whether Mr. Jones is at home," proposed Mr. Prescott.

So before the middle of the afternoon they rang Old Dut's doorbell. The principal was at home and greeted both pleasantly. As soon as he heard the nature of their errand, Old Dut led them to his study.

"I have a little bit of a misroscope den off this room," explained the principal. "Now, Dick, let me see that leaf again. Ah, yes; this is your own blood on the leaf. And this is the other spot. Just so."

Old Dut picked up a pair of scissors, cutting out the spot that Dick had brought home with him the night before. To this he applied water, soaking the substance off, and putting a smear of the red stuff on a microscope slide. This slide he dried at gentle heat over a spirit lamp, next placed a very thin cover glass over the smear, and placed the whole under one of the objectives of his microscope. Some focusing followed, Old Dut peering down through the eyepiece. At last, with a chuckle, he remarked:

"I think I know what this stuff is."

"It isn't blood, then?" asked Mr. Prescott, while Dick, silent, looked on full of eager interest.

"No; look at it yourself, Mr. Prescott," replied the Grammar School principal. "If it were blood, you'd see a lot of blood cells, red and white, through the mass. The red cells would be more numerous, but the white cells would be larger."

"Why, these little specks are all red," said Mr. Prescott, after looking through the microscope. "And they look like roughly formed grains."

"Exactly," nodded Old Dut. "That smear doesn't represent blood. I think I know what it is, but I'm going to prove my opinion."

Old Dut stepped over to a cabinet in which he kept many boxes of prepared slides of microscopic material. After some hunting he came back with a slide that he placed under the objective of the microscope.

"I was right," murmured the principal. "Take a look, Mr. Prescott, and see if this doesn't look like exactly the same stuff that we found in the smear."

Dick's father nodded. Then the boy was allowed a look at both slides.

"Then, sir, what is the stuff?" asked Dick.

"Powdered carmine, which is derived from cochineal," replied Old Dut. "Carmine is the basis of a good many of the red inks found on the market. In other words, Master Prescott, your 'ghost' fired a shot after pouring some red ink on the ground and over the leaves of a bush or two."

"There can't be any doubt as to that conclusion, can there, Mr. Jones?" inquired Mr. Prescott.

"The evidence, sir," replied the schoolmaster, "is conclusive enough to be accepted in any court."

"Then it all proves what I believed yesterday," murmured Dick. "I was sure that some clever joker, or rascal, was behind the ghost scare. Yet how did he do all the things that happened yesterday evening? How did he ring the bell, when we were standing by the bell-rope? And how were our hats knocked off, when there was no one near enough to do it? And how did the joker—or scoundrel—hide so quickly after firing the shot? How did he escape without making any noise to betray him?"

"It's a big puzzle as yet," responded the schoolmaster. "But I'd like to go out and have a look at the place—and I believe I shall."

"Are you going this afternoon, sir?" breathed young Prescott.

"Yes; I believe I shall."

"And may I go, too, sir?"

"If you like."

"And may I bring the fellows?"

"Well, now we don't want too big a crowd if we're going on a secret quest," laughed Old Dut. "I'll tell you; you might go and get Masters Darrin and Reade, if they can be ready and get here quickly. Mr. Prescott, you will go with us?"

"I would very much like to," Dick's father answered. "I always try to get a good walk somewhere on Sunday, after being cooped in the store all of the week."

Dick was away like a flash. He ran all the way to Dave's house, and Darrin agreed to get Tom in a hurry and report at Old Dut's home.

Within a few minutes the little expedition had gathered. Old Dut went to a cupboard, taking out a hat.

"Do you intend to go armed, sir?" suggested Dick.

"Yes," smiled the principal, holding up two capable-looking hands. "I shall take with me two weapons that have never yet failed me at need."

"But the fellow we're trying to run down is armed with a pistol, sir."

"So I understand. Well, then, as a sop to

safety, I'll carry this heavy cane, though it will be still heavier before I get back with it. But pistols, my boy, belong to war time and to the police. No sane citizen needs to carry a revolver in a civilized country in times of peace."

"A good many folks do carry them, sir," Dick hazarded.

"Yes," admitted the schoolmaster. "But they're mostly boys—young fellows who haven't learned to depend upon themselves. And wherever you find boys stealthily carrying pistols, you'll always find that these boys are the biggest cowards in the community."

"Remember that, son," nodded Mr. Prescott approvingly.

"I never carried a pistol, sir," Dick answered, reddening slightly. "I don't want to, either, for I don't wish to be classed with cowards."

"I know a fellow who does sometimes slip a pistol into his pocket before going out at night," Tom remarked. "Just as Old D—as Mr. Jones—says, the fellow is one of the biggest cowards that I know."

"He's a boy?" asked the schoolmaster.

"Yes, sir; about seventeen years old."

"Keep away from him, then," counselled Old Dut. "He's not dangerous to rogues, but he's a peril to his own friends."

Then the expedition set forth.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SCHOOLMASTER AS A FOX

"HERE'S the rope, sir. And we stood at the right side of it when some other force rang the bell."

So Dave explained as the party stood looking about in the hallway of the old-time school-house.

Mr. Jones did not speak. He wanted to see how far his schoolboys were capable of discovering and interpreting signs for themselves.

"Here's the old ladder that runs up into the cupola," remarked Tom Reade, stepping over to it.

"And it has been used lately, too," announced Dick. "See, though the ladder is old and dusty, the dust has been kicked off in spots. Someone has been climbing up to the cupola."

Still the schoolmaster did not speak, but he nodded quietly to Mr. Prescott.

"If some one else has been using the ladder," Dave suggested, "we may as well do the same. Let's go up and see what was done above."

But Dick was already well up the rungs, Tom following. After the boys went the two men.

"Ho-ho!" chuckled Dick. "Here's an end

of string that was tied around the clapper of the bell. Whoever tied it on was in a hurry, and cut the string. Now, this string is quite new in appearance, so it has been tied on lately."

"It's a bit of fish-line," declared Reade, examining the fragment of twine that was knotted around the clapper.

"But how did the rascal use it?" Dick wondered, staring around him. Then, suddenly he ran to one side of the cupola.

"Here's a double-headed tack driven into the woodwork," Dick called out. "Most likely the string was passed through this, pulley fashion. In that case, then, the string was passed down to the ground. For that matter, then, whoever held the line and pulled the bell clapper probably hid in the woods yonder. I can see just how any one might do it."

"Your reasoning is quite correct, Master Prescott," nodded the schoolmaster. "And this drill, this afternoon, is quite as good as any drill that you might have in school. You are learning to use your eyes and to reason on what you see. That is quite as good training as any young man can have."

"Then we know how to account for the bell ringing," summed up Tom. "And we know the secret of the sham-blood stains. But what knocked our hats off?"

"When we're ready," proposed Dick, "we'll go over to the spot where our hats were taken off so neatly."

"You might as well go now, then," suggested Old Dut.

Accordingly Dick and Dave led the way to the spot, between the two slender trees, where they had been so neatly unhatted the night before.

"Tacks," reported Dick after a few moments. "See, one was driven into either tree. Why, a string tied across from tree to tree, at that height, would be just high enough to take off our hats."

"Even so," replied Mr. Prescott, "how could the joker or villain know that you would pass between these two trees? Besides, if some one taller than you boys had gone between these trees the string would have hit him somewhere else—in the face, say."

"Mr. Prescott," answered Old Dut, "had you gone between these trees last night, and had a small bit of twine cut you in the face, wouldn't you have been startled?"

"Probably," admitted the bookseller.

"And, had you been inclined to believe in ghosts, you would have been terrified enough to have fled at once," continued the schoolmaster.

"Let's see if we can find any other trees with

tacks in them, or bits of string still tied there," proposed Dick.

Within ten minutes the three Grammar School boys had found several tacks driven into the bark of other trees.

"Why, by night," muttered Dick, "the fellow behind the ghost scare must have had several twines stretched up through the woods. That was to frighten any one who had the nerve to try to chase the ghost. But what I want to know now, is how the fellow fired that shot and then got away so quietly and quickly."

"To find that out," proposed Tom, "it will be necessary to go back to the place where the shooting seemed to take place, and where we found the red splotches."

"Correct," nodded Dick.

The three boys made their way to that spot, the two men following more leisurely.

"They're brave, common-sense boys," murmured the schoolmaster to the bookseller.

"Don't you generally find that, in boys, bravery and good sense go together?" inquired Mr. Prescott.

"Always. Most boys, last night, would have run away as fast as their legs could take them. But these youngsters had the courage to remain and do all the investigating that they could do in the dark."

"Mrs. Prescott is becoming worried about Dick running into so many strange adventures in the woods," remarked the bookseller.

"Why should your wife worry?" smiled Old Dut. "Her son has shown, so far, a remarkably fine ability to take care of himself."

Dick, Dave and Tom were now beating about through clumps of bushes near the scene of the "shooting" of the night before.

"What's this rabbit-hole?" called Dave Darrin, laying something bare in the center of a thicket.

"Rabbit-hole?" uttered Dick, springing to his side, then going down on his knees and pawing with both hands. "Dave, now you see me—and now you don't!"

Prescott vanished from before Darrin's eyes, though not much to the latter's mystification.

"Say, won't you please come here?" Dave called to the two men, while Reade, who had just reached the spot, first opened his mouth very wide, then grinned as he peered down into the hole in which Dick lay comfortably at ease.

"Here's where our 'ghost' must have crawled back last night, after sprinkling his red stuff and firing the shot," announced Dick, as his father and the schoolmaster came up.

In his glee Dick threshed his feet about in the hole, next looked thoughtful, and presently

crawled back into the hole again. When he reappeared he held up a dingy-looking little old bottle. Across the label were printed the words:

"Best red ink."

"That must be the 'ber-lud' of the ghostly slaying of last night," declared Reade in tragic tones.

Dick crawled out of the hole, brushing his clothing, while Dave and Tom went into it in turn.

"The bell-ringer could work nicely from that hole, with the twine tied to the bell-clapper in one hand," laughed young Prescott.

"And thus you see, boys," smiled Old Dut, "by the aid of daylight and a pair of observing eyes a ghost mystery can often be very easily laid bare. Probably that applies to about every ghost trick that was ever invented."

"Say, I'd like to see the faces of some of these farmers around here, when they hear the real ghost story," chuckled Tom.

"All the farmers don't live in the country," murmured the bookseller. "A lot of them may be found in our largest cities."

"It seems to me as though this were one of the best day's work I've ever helped to do," murmured Dick, as he stood by chewing at a blade of grass he had plucked.

"Many a man feels that way after he has done

rather more than his usual amount of thinking and observing," added Old Dut.

"Well, we're through here, aren't we?" asked Darrin. "We've solved the mystery."

"All except the biggest part of it," Dick retorted.

"What's that?"

"We don't yet know the name or the face of the fellow who has been behind this whole hoax."

At that moment footsteps were heard in the deeper woods. Some one was coming in their direction.

"Better crouch down behind the bushes," whispered Dick, "and have first look at the new-comer."

After a few moments more a brutish-looking fellow parted a fringe of bushes beyond and surveyed the scene. As he did so he caught a glimpse of the top of the schoolmaster's hat. That was enough for the fellow, who turned and ran rapidly back in the direction from which he had come.

"It may be worth while to catch that chap!" uttered Dick Prescott, jumping up. "That's—Tim!"

"The would-be bank robber who escaped?" cried Old Dut. All five went in instant pursuit. Mr. Prescott brought up the rear, panting a good deal. Dick, Dave and Tom ran almost bunched,

though making fine time. But the long-legged schoolmaster! It fairly did the boys good to see the way that Old Dut sprinted through the woods, gaining at every leap upon the quarry ahead.

Looking backward over his shoulder, Tim saw the schoolmaster close upon him. Like a flash Tim turned on a course nearly at right angles to the one he had been following. Old Dut crashed after him, springing through a green fringe of bushes.

The next instant Old Dut let out a genuine howl. The ground had given way under him, and he shot down toward—he knew not what.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHERE THE BASEBALL LANDED

“**A**RE you hurt, sir?” queried Dick, halting at the edge of a roughly-cut trench and glancing down.

That trench was some seven feet deep, but not long or wide. The opening to it had been neatly concealed by brush and earth.

“Give Mr. Jones a hand and we’ll haul him out,” advised Darrin.

“No; stand back, boys; I can pull myself out,” announced the schoolmaster, in a tone of deep disgust. “My, but I’m old enough to know better than to go around tumbling into such traps as this.”

Reaching above him, Old Dut pulled himself out much as an athlete chins himself on the horizontal bar. Then the schoolmaster stood up.

“Hurt, sir?” repeated Dick anxiously.

“Not much, I guess,” grunted the schoolmaster, trying a few steps. He limped slightly, though he declared that he was in no pain.

“And all the time we’re letting that cheeky rascal get away from us,” cried Old Dut.

“Well, in what direction did he go?” Dick wanted to know. All hands listened, only to

realize that, by this time, Tim had managed to get so far away that his continued flight left no guiding sound.

"We may as well give up the pursuit," declared Mr. Prescott. "This is a job for a paid police force, at any rate."

"I don't believe I'll do any more creditable running to-day," winced Old Dut, "and that rascal is too fleet for you boys to hope to keep up with him, even if you were to sight him. So I guess we may as well call the pursuit ended as far as we are concerned."

"At least," glowed Dick, "we know the trick of the Haunted School, and we also have the best reason to believe that Tim has been the only ghost around here. But why did the fellow want to take all the trouble to rig up his 'haunt'?"

"That's a question that I guess Tim alone could answer," replied Mr. Prescott. "Whatever his object, it wasn't a good one, for Tim is not one who lives by good deeds."

"Why the fellow is staying around in this part of the country at all is something that I can't understand," pursued Tom.

"Unless he has hopes of rescuing his confederate, Bink," Dick suggested.

"There's a good deal, I think, in that idea," nodded Old Dut. "If he didn't hope to save his friend I should imagine that Tim would prefer

to be far away from Gridley. He would certainly be safer almost anywhere else."

By the time that they reached Gridley all hands felt as though they had been engaged in deeds that make for good citizenship.

"I am going direct to the police with our information," announced Mr. Prescott.

"May we go with you?" Dick inquired.

"No; for I feel that, the less often boys visit police stations, the better it will be for them."

"Then we might go to the "Blade" office and see if we can find Len Spencer," Dick proposed, to which there was no objection.

"As for the poor schoolmaster," grinned Old Dut, "he thinks he will go home and rub his slightly sprained ankle."

"I hope it isn't going to be anything like a serious injury, sir," said Dick.

"Little danger of that, Master Prescott. An ankle isn't in a very bad way when I can walk so easily on it and for a long distance."

So the boys hied themselves to the local newspaper office, where they found Len alone. That hustling purveyor of local news sat in a tilted-back chair, his feet upon a desk.

"Hello, kids," was Len's greeting, accompanied by a yawn. "The old man (editor) wants me to get up a rattling second-day story on the Haunted School business. I'm racking

my brain for something that will sound interesting and at the same time will be somewhat likely."

"Save your tired brain," laughed Dick. "You won't have to invent anything. We have something better—the facts."

Down came Len's feet in an instant, and he was all attention. As he began to catch the drift of the story Len whistled.

"Boys, you're wonders. You ought to be in the newspaper business."

"Is there really any demand for clever people in the newspaper business?" drawled Tom.

* * * * *

Three policemen spent the entire night and much of the next forenoon trying to run down Tim. They didn't find him.

Bink, however, was now well enough to be removed from under police guard at the hospital to be taken to the county jail, there to await summons to trial. Thus there was little likelihood that Tim, if he remained near Gridley, would be able to rescue his confederate.

They were all glorious days at this season of the year. Summer came near with rapid strides. The earliest of the straw hats appeared. Boydom was supremely happy, between the outdoor life in balmy air and the nearness of the "long vacation."

As June approached Tim was all but forgotten, even by Dick & Co., who had such excellent reasons for remembering the fellow.

"Whew!" muttered Greg, as the chums, one morning, starting early, sauntered along on the way to the school. "It's going to be fiery hot by afternoon. Yet I suppose we've got to turn out and run when school lets out.

"We have," Dick informed him.

"When on earth are we going to begin to practise ball this year? The South and North Grammar teams have been at it for weeks."

"We'll turn out for first practice on Saturday, if it's a good day," Prescott promised.

"And we're going to get chased off the map," observed Dan. "The other Grammar School teams have a tremendous start on us."

"But they haven't our practice in running," Dick retorted.

"Pooh!" grumbled Harry. "Baseball is made up mostly of throwing, catching and hitting the ball."

"Wait and see," Dick answered patiently. "Maybe, in the end, you will admit that we've taken the right course by hardening ourselves to running. All of us can handle the ball fairly well. Outside of that, it's wind and leg work that count in a ball game."

"We'll see," grunted Hazelton skeptically.

"Yes; we will see," broke in Dave stoutly. "And we'll find, at that, that Dick is right and that he has known what he was doing."

"You say that because you and Dick lead all of the rest of us at running," objected Harry.

"If we lead you at running, then you'll soon discover that we lead you all around at baseball," retorted Darrin.

"So we're going to run this afternoon?" pressed Dan.

"Yes, siree," said Prescott with emphasis.

"Then, why can't we take a ball with us?" Dalzell insisted. "We might have a little fun throwing along the road."

"Oh, yes; take a ball, a top or two and some marbles with you," laughed Dick.

That was the last that any of them thought of the ball, except Dan. However, when they had left the Central Grammar a mile behind them that afternoon, and were nearing Norton's woods at a jog, Dan suddenly called out:

"Don't stop running, Harry. Spread out ahead of me, and see if you can make a running catch."

"Good idea," Dick nodded approvingly. "Get a good interval, Harry."

Hazelton put on a little extra spurt. Then, some hundred feet from Dan, Harry wheeled and faced about, running backward.

"Let 'er drive!" sang Hazelton. "High, arching ball!"

Dan stopped just an instant, to get a better grip and twist on the ball. Then he sent one that rose too high. Hazelton had to run in some thirty feet, but he neatly picked the ball out of the air.

"Drive it back, Harry!" urged Dan.

Hazelton took the other at his word, sending the ball in low, and with almost an imitation of cannon-ball speed. Dalzell knew that it was going to be "hot," but he threw his hands forward and poised himself nicely for the catch. Into his hands it came, with a stinging force that made Dan shake his red, tingling hand for a moment or two.

"I didn't tell you to put any real gunpowder behind it," muttered Dan. Then he grinned, as he added:

"Take the ball back! Look out for it! Don't flinch."

Harry knew his punishment was coming, yet before the crowd it would never do to be a muff. So he stood his ground, his fingers burning in anticipation of the hot one that was coming.

Dan, after several mystical flourishes, let go of the sphere. It looked like a swift target shot, but there was an outshoot to it that carried it just outside the tips of Hazelton's waiting hands.

The ball grounded and rolled fifty feet further on.

"What made you get so nervous, and dodge it?" inquired Dalzell, with a provoking grin.

"I didn't," flared Harry. "Why didn't you send it in straight? Did you think I was over under the trees?"

"What you need is a padded twelve-ounce glove for the ball to land in," teased Tom Reade.

"I'll show you!" muttered Hazelton, running after the ball. He had some difficulty in finding it, but at last he had it once more in his hands.

Don't throw it back just yet," jeered Dan. "Keep it in your hands a while, so that you'll get used to the feel of it there."

"All right," mocked Harry. "I'll keep it until next year, and get thoroughly used to it."

"If you keep it until you're not afraid of it," mocked Dalzell with one of his broadest grins, "I'll never get it back."

Harry Hazelton flushed, sputtered, and made a face.

"Careful, Dan!" urged Dick in a low voice. "Don't carry your 'stringing' too far. There's no sense in starting bad feeling with a mighty good fellow."

Again Dick & Co. jogged along, Hazelton in the lead and still holding the ball. Finally he halted, calling back:

"On your base, Dan! It's coming!"

Dalzell halted. Harry gave the ball a twist or two of his wrist, then let it fly straight, but with speed. Dan, however, caught it nicely.

"Now, see if you can do as well," called back Dan, with another mischief-making grin. He let drive. At the instant before releasing the ball Dan's wrist turned. The ball flew widely to the left of Hazelton, passing several feet higher than his head at that.

"You'll chase that ball yourself!" called Hazelton disdainfully, turning to watch the leather sphere as it arched, then dropped well into the woods.

Just as it happened, the ball fell directly on the reclining form of a boy, one of a group of boys who, after a long tramp, were resting in the woods out of sight of Dick & Co.

"Ouch!" yelled an angry voice. "Who threw that ball at me?"

"I beg your pardon!" bawled Dan, as he continued to run forward. "I threw the ball, and my wrist gave out. It was an accident."

"Keep the ball," advised the voice of another unseen speaker.

"You bet I will!" declared the first speaker in the woods. "But I want to see the idiot who——"

Bert Dodge, holding the ball in his hands,

stepped into view, followed by Fred Ripley and three other fellows.

Dan stopped running, but walked forward, his apology frozen on his lips. There wouldn't be much sense in begging Bert Dodge's pardon.

"So you're the little mucker that——" began Dodge angrily.

"I threw the ball," retorted Dan frigidly, "but it is the fellow who is glaring at me that deserves the name of mucker."

"Well, you'll never get that ball back," sputtered Bert. "Neither you nor any of your tribe of wood-rats. You fellows are the cheapest gamins that run the streets of Gridley."

"I'll call you down on that statement," broke in Dick Prescott, stepping briskly forward and whipping off his coat, which he tossed to Tom Reade.

"You? Call me down?" cried Bert Dodge, aghast.

"Yes, Dodge; you've been about the meanest fellow that I've ever had the hard luck to know," Dick shot back, his eyes snapping with wrath. "We fellows have always minded our own business, and from this minute you'll have to do the same, or——"

"Or?" insisted Bert mockingly.

"Or I'm going to make you!" Prescott flashed back.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE ON THE ROAD

“**S**AY, but that’s pretty bold talk!” uttered Dodge, stepping closer. “Have you any idea to whom you’re talking?”

“Yes,” said Dick unconcernedly. “To one of the cheapest pieces of trash I’ve ever seen.”

“You—you little mucker!” gasped Bert, though he made no effort to remove his coat.

“Don’t call any names that you can’t prove,” warned Dick.

“But you called me——”

“That’s different. I’m willing to prove what I said.”

“And I’ll prove that you’re the mucker I called you.”

“All right, Dodge,” Dick answered. “But you can’t prove anything with your tongue, for no one who knows you well would take your word on any subject. I’ve called you an unpleasant name, and I stand ready to back up my words with my hands. That’s the only way you can prove the name that you called me.”

“You’re too small for me to fight,” jeered Bert.

“I’m too big, though, for you to feel inclined

to try it," retorted Prescott with biting irony. "You're a bluffer, Dodge. You can wag your tongue fast, but haven't the courage of a sand-fly."

"Oh, I haven't, eh?" demanded the High School boy, his face purpling.

"Take off your coat and trim the little mucker, Bert," Fred Ripley advised. "If you don't, then you'll always have to stand a lot of talk from these Grammar School kids."

"Prescott," offered Bert with surprising generosity, "I'll give you half a minute in which to take back what you said."

"I'm not going to take it back," came defiantly from Dick. "I said it on purpose to make you fight, and fight you must. I don't like fighting. I have a poor opinion of it, and of fighters, but this is one case where the fight will have to come off. Nothing else will ever stop you from annoying us every time we chance to get near you."

"Get off your coat, Bert," again advised young Ripley.

"I'm not going to fight a fellow that size," Bert rejoined doggedly.

"All right, then," offered Prescott; "I'll call the fight off if you'll give your word never to annoy us again."

"Oh, you'll call it off, will you, you little

wood-rat?" sputtered Bert, his face growing very red.

"Take your coat off, Bert," almost ordered Fred Ripley.

This time Bert did so.

"I'm not going to fight that little mucker," Bert ground out between his clenched teeth. "But I am going to spank him."

"Come and try it," Dick invited readily enough.

"Go on in!" Ripley urged tersely. "We'll see fair play."

"Fair play?" mocked Bert. "I don't need it. I can handle the whole lot, spanking one after another."

"Start with me," Dick invited, dancing up and making a swift feint at Dodge's face.

Bert drew back, for he believed that the Grammar School boy had meant to hit him.

"That was only warning," Dick went on coolly. "The next one will land on you if I can make it."

As Prescott darted forward again Dodge realized that he must really put his hands up.

Dick drove out with his right fist. Bert parried it neatly enough, though he failed to stop Prescott's left-hander, that landed not very heavily on his right ribs.

"You cheeky little piece of punk!" raged

Dodge, leaping forward. He aimed two blows at Dick, but neither hit more than air.

"Come on!" jeered Dick. "Give me some more like that!"

Bert Dodge accepted the invitation in a rage. He fairly leaped at the smaller boy, trying to beat him down with his fists.

"Cool down and show some science!" taunted Dick. "If you don't, you'll be lying on the ground soon!"

"Will, I though?" quivered Bert, rushing in close again. This time Prescott landed one on his ribs that made him stagger a bit, following it up with a blow on the end of Bert's nose that brought results.

"How did that feel?" smiled Prescott coolly.

"Nothing like what you're going to feel in a minute," raged Dodge. This time he got in close, clinched and began to hammer Dick while holding him.

"Break away, you big coward!" cried Dave Darrin angrily.

"See here, kid, you hold your tongue!" commanded Ripley, glaring at Darrin.

"One at a time, Rip," flashed back Dave. "I'll take you on as soon as Prescott has finished with that big, tongue-free booby."

Dick had succeeded in pulling himself free. He was somewhat winded from the body blows

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he had received in the foul clinch, but he sparred valiantly for time.

Bert's anger went up to boiling point when he realized that his nose was bleeding slightly from the tap that young Prescott had given him.

Again Bert tried to rush to a clinch, but this time Dick side-stepped in time, next drove in a blow that mussed up Bert's right eye.

"Wow!" whooped Tom Reade, and the Grammar School boys cheered.

"Jump in and finish him, Bert!" cried Ripley in exasperation. "Don't give the little monkey so much breathing time."

"That's right," glared Dave at Fred. "Get off all of your funny talk now, for you won't feel as chipper when I've had my turn with you."

Once more Dick and Bert were fighting in close, giving and taking considerable punishment. Though Dodge had not a great abundance of grit by nature, punishment was sure to arouse him to a rage in which he would do his best to turn out victor.

"Good!" cheered Ripley, as Bert landed a blow on Dick's forehead that nearly toppled the Grammar School boy in the road. Yet Prescott came back gamely, sparring just a few moments for his wind.

"Whoop!" yelled Greg Holmes, as Dick

dropped a fist over Bert's other eye. "Oh, that was a dandy!"

Honk! honk! honk! sounded an automobile horn, imperiously as a big touring car neared the boys who filled the middle of the road.

"Time!" yelled Fred Ripley, as he side-stepped to the edge of the road. "Take your time to breathe until the car gets by."

Bert let his hands fall and slid to the side of the road gladly enough. He intended to finish Prescott, but was surprised to find how tough this smaller Grammar School boy was in a fight.

The car, however, came to a stop close at hand.

"What is this, Albert?" called the displeased voice of the elder Dodge. "Put on your coat, young man, and get into this car at once."

As Fred Ripley handed over the coat, Dalzell saw that the lawyer's son held the ball that had been turned over by Bert.

"Give me my ball," Dan demanded, stepping forward quickly.

Under the cold, displeased glare of Mr. Dodge Fred didn't choose to have any words over the matter.

"There's your old ball," he retorted, giving it a vigorous toss that landed it in the woods fifty yards from the road.

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1 "Will you go along with us, Fred?" called Mr. Dodge.

"Thank you, sir; I think I shall," and Ripley stepped into the car under a fire of mocking glances from the Grammar School boys.

• "Bert," continued his father, turning to Dick's late opponent, "I am astonished at your conduct. I simply won't have you fighting."

"Oh, I give you my word of honor that Bert wasn't fighting," Tom Reade called ironically, as the car started onward.

Then, with a great chuckle, and raising his voice, Tom shouted this additional information:

"But Dick Prescott was certainly going some! Come again, Bert, when you can stay longer!"

CHAPTER XX

BEN AND HEN FIND CHARMING FRIENDS

"**H**ERE comes Bert," whispered Dave that evening, as all of the members of Dick & Co., save Tom Reade, neared a corner on Main Street.

"I'm not interested in him," Dick replied. "If he'll let us alone, that's all we want of him."

"I'm going to stop him and ask him how he feels," grinned Dan. "What I really want is to see if his eyes are blackened."

"Dan, don't you say anything, or mock the fellow in any way," Dick ordered sternly. "We don't want to keep bad blood going all the time."

So Dick & Co. were silent as Fred Ripley and Bert stalked majestically by. Dan, however, wasn't the only one who looked covertly to see whether Bert's eyes had been blackened. In this hope the Grammar School boys were disappointed. One of Bert's eyes had had a tinge of black and green underneath, but Bert had visited a druggist, who had painted this out with a flesh-tint.

Both Fred and Bert felt relieved when they got by these younger boys. Both had feared

that the dispute might be reopened on Main Street.

"I guess Prescott got all he wanted this afternoon," sniffed Dodge in a self-satisfied way.

"But wasn't it surprising, the way the little beggar lasted in coming at you?" Fred inquired.

"Not so very," drawled Dodge importantly. "He looked so confoundedly small that I hadn't the heart to trim him the way I would have done with a fellow of my own size."

A block further on these two poor specimens of High School boys espied Tom Reade, who was on his way to join his chums.

Tom approached with such a grin of amusement on his face that Fred Ripley couldn't let him get by.

"Reade, you act as if you thought your champion did pretty well in the fight this afternoon," taunted the lawyer's son.

"Fight?" echoed Reade, halting and looking innocently surprised. "I don't remember any fight to-day."

"Yes, you do," insisted Fred. "I'm talking about the trouble between Dodge and that little mucker of your crowd."

"Oh, that?" asked Tom, with an accent of disgust. "That wasn't a fight. That was a spanking, with Dick Prescott acting the part of the indignant father."

Fred would have made an angry answer, but just then he caught a glimpse of Tom's friends coming along to meet him. So the two older boys hurried on their way.

"Haw, haw, haw!" floated back Tom's hearty laugh. "They're the most comical pair," he explained to his chums. "They described this afternoon's affair as a 'fight.'"

"Well, wasn't it?" challenged Dalzell. "It wasn't their fight, though."

"It wasn't a fight at all," Dave laughed. "In two minutes more Dick would have had the fellow eating dirt at the side of the road. Dodge was at his mercy."

"Maybe it looked that way to you," Dick remarked quietly. "It didn't to me, though. Had Bert kept at it long enough he would have had me down. But I gave him so much trouble that I think he'll stop bothering us after this."

"I think he will," agreed Tom solemnly.

It might have been well for Dick Prescott had he kept that worthless High School pair in sight.

For, within a few minutes, Dodge and Ripley encountered Ben Alvord and Hen Dutcher.

"Say," demanded Hen, as he halted the pair of older boys, "what's this I hear about Dick Prescott thumping one of you?"

"Who told you that?" demanded Bert, turning white with rage.

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"It must have been Prescott himself," jeered Fred.

"No-o-o, it wasn't," admitted Hen slowly.

"It must have been one of that crowd," Fred insisted.

"Why do you think so?" asked Hen, hoping to gain time.

"Because they were the only ones there, except our crowd."

"Then it happened, did it?" demanded Hen eagerly.

As a matter of fact, Hen had heard the whole story from one of the boys who had been with Ripley and Dodge that afternoon. Yet Hen had heard the story under a pledge of secrecy, and, for reasons of prudence, young Dutcher didn't want to betray his informant.

"If it didn't happen then, how could any crowd have been there?" asked Ben Alvord with a good deal of logic.

"Well, there was a bit of a fight——" Fred began.

"No, there wasn't" Bert disputed angrily. "You see, boys, all that happened was that young Prescott got just a bit too funny, and I had to box his ears."

"But I heard," objected Hen, "that Dick Prescott made your nose bleed, and that he reached both of your eyes."

"Do you see anything wrong with my nose, or with my eyes, either?" laughed Bert harshly.

Hen Dutcher had to admit that he didn't. The light, where they stood, wasn't strong enough to disclose the druggist's neat work with the flesh-tint.

"I'm awfully sorry you didn't knock Prescott's head clean off his shoulders," Hen continued. "That fellow needs a lesson."

"He'll get one," insisted Bert, "if he ever tries to bother me again. But I guess he won't."

"Then you've another guess coming," retorted Dutcher. "Dick Prescott isn't the kind to stop doing things just because he has his ears boxed once. He's about the meanest fellow—and the freshest—that I ever knew. He's always looking for trouble."

"And then, after he's done it," added Ben Alvord with venom, "he always has the luck to get praised for doing something smart."

"He's your classmate, but you fellows don't seem to like Prescott," Bert remarked.

"I hate Prescott," Alvord declared quickly.

"So do I," added Hen instantly. "I used to like him pretty well, but—say! That fellow has never been anything but mean to me."

"I'll get even with him one of these days," predicted Ben.

"I'm going to get even with him more than

once," boasted Dutcher. "It'll take a lot more than once to make me feel that I've squared accounts with Dick Prescott."

A thoughtful, rather crafty look had come into Bert's face. Taking out his handkerchief, he mopped his face.

"Fearfully warm night," he muttered. They had strolled along until now they were close to the entrance to a drug store. From within came the inviting hiss of a soda fountain.

"You'd think it was warm," muttered Hen, "if you had had to do the chores that I had to do after supper. I'm almost wringing wet."

"I don't work, so I don't get warm after that fashion," declared Bert, with an air of languid elegance. "Still, I can feel the heat. When I'm on Main Street, though, I always know what to do on a warm evening."

"What?" inquired Hen.

"I buy myself a few ice cream sodas."

"Yes; that's all right for you," retorted Hen enviously. "Your father is a rich man, lives in a fine house and has plenty of money. I suppose you have plenty of money, too."

"I have enough to meet the needs of a civilized life," drawled Bert, drawing from his pocket a little bundle of one-dollar bills.

"Say, but you're all right, aren't you?" cried Hen, with another pang of envy.

Ben Alvord, equally a prey to envy, said nothing, but stood back sullenly, wondering what all this was to lead to.

"I feel that I'm about due to have a few ice cream sodas now," continued Bert. "Do you boys care to join us?"

Did they? With that alluring hiss coming out through the open doorway. These two poorer boys, who rarely had even a nickel of their own, felt decidedly wistful as they saw the lucky customers lined up at a marble-topped counter.

"Come along in," proposed Bert genially.

Yet neither he nor Fred quite relished being seen too publicly with Ben and Hen, whom they considered as belonging to the riff-raff. So Bert, who was familiar with the plan of the store, led the way down to the rear of the store. The four took seats around a table in an alcove, out of sight of the street and of the counter crowd.

"Why didn't you stay out in the big room?" Dutcher inquired.

"Oh, the counter is for the floating trade," Dodge answered. "I always come in where I can be more private when I intend to stay for some time and indulge in several sodas."

Several? How Dutcher's mouth began to water. And here stood the white-jacketed young clerk, inquiring what they were going to have.

"Gimme peach, the first time," begged Hen, and he got it. He ate that, and more ice cream sodas of other flavors, with tremendous relish, talking freely most of the time. Alvord said little or nothing at first, though he got just as much pleasure out of the treat.

"Say, you two are pretty bright fellows," discovered Dodge at last.

"Thanks for your good opinion," chirped Hen blithely, and looking tremendously pleased.

"We'll have to invite you two in again, when we meet you on the street," Dodge went on.

"Surely," nodded Ripley, who wondered what kind of a game Bert Dodge could be playing.

"I suppose, by fall, you'll both be with us over in the High School," Bert continued.

"I won't," Hen declared. "I gotter find a job as soon as I'm through common school."

"Are you coming to High School?" asked Bert, glancing at Ben.

Alvord shook his head.

"Too bad," beamed Bert. "I wish we were going to have you both over in the High School. Does Prescott go to work, too, when he leaves the Central Grammar?"

"No siree!" muttered Hen Dutcher. "He's going to High. At least, he tells all the fellows that he is."

"That's bad news," frowned Bert. "High

School is a place for gentlemen and bright fellows."

"What's the difference?" inquired Ben Alvord.

"Difference between what?" Dodge asked.

"Between gentlemen and bright fellows?"

Bert looked puzzled, then began to laugh.

"Oh, you misunderstood me," he explained.

"But speaking of Prescott, fellows of his stripe are bound to lower the standing of the school by coming to it. I wish something would happen to keep Prescott from mixing in with us at High."

"So do I," exclaimed Hen fervently.

"So do I," added Alvord.

"You—you—don't suppose anything could happen—accidentally—do you?" suggested Bert.

"What do you mean?" gasped Hen Dutcher.

Then followed a long talk, which required the ordering of some more ice cream sodas.

"Oh, dear me!" groaned Hen, when he and Alvord were alone later on the street.

"What's the matter?" grunted Alvord.

"I wish I hadn't taken so many sodas!"

"Then why did you?"

"Because I never had any before, and they were mighty good. I didn't know how filling they were, though."

"Just rub your stomach a little, and you'll be all right, after a while," Ben counseled him.

"But say! Aren't Dodge and Ripley fine fellows?" Hen went on with enthusiasm. "Not a bit stuck up, either, in spite of all the money their fathers have got."

"Hen, you're a simpleton!" growled Ben.

"Why am I?"

"Because you haven't brains enough to know that Ripley and Dodge were nice to you just because they think they can use you."

"Well, it's an honor to be used by them," maintained Hen, who was a born toady.

"Oh, I don't mind their using us, as long as they're willing to pay us for it," rejoined Ben, who, on the other hand, answered better to the description of a born anarchist.

"And say, but they're paying us, and no mistake!" chuckled Hen, producing a dollar bill that he had got from Bert. "You've got one just like it, too, Ben."

"That's all right. I know I have. And I've got to do a lot to earn it, too."

"Oh, it won't be much work," protested Hen.

"No; but it's brain work, and that's the kind that's always the best paid," Alvord replied.

"And what's better," continued Hen exultantly, "we are to get another whole dollar apiece when—that is to say, later."

CHAPTER XXI

HATCHING THE SCHOOL PLOT

CLANG, clang, clang! rang the yard gong at the Central Grammar.

Boys and girls had been out barely two minutes of their forenoon recess when this interruption came.

Clang, clang, clang! ripped out the gong again. There certainly seemed to be anger in the tone.

"Who's fooling with the gong?" demanded Ben Alvord.

"We gotter go in, anyway," cried another boy.

"It's all a joke! Some one is playing a trick on us," shouted Ben.

"Keep quiet," whispered Dutcher.

"I know what I'm doing," returned Alvord in a voice that only Hen heard. "I'm going to help throw suspicion off myself."

"Talk too much and you'll make suspicion," warned Dutcher.

At this moment Old Dut appeared on the boys' side of the yard, one of the under teachers on the girls' side.

"Only the eighth grade will march in," an-

nounced the principal at the top of his voice. "The rest of the pupils will continue to enjoy themselves."

Then into the boys' basement hurried Old Dut, where he shouted:

"Eighth grade boys will form promptly and march at once."

On the stairs sounded the tramp of boys in single file. Up two flights they went, following the monitor, and turned down the corridor, thence into the coatroom.

"What's up, Dick?" whispered Dave in the brief interval in the coatroom.

"Blessed if I know," Prescott answered honestly.

"It's queer to chop our recess like that," muttered Tom. Then the boys filed into the classroom, taking their seats.

On the platform stood Old Dut. Never had the boys seen their principal look sterner.

"The young ladies who have suffered may now appear," announced Old Dut.

From the girls' coatroom appeared more than a dozen girls, each bearing a tattered spring hat.

"Some vandal in the class has ruined a lot of pretty hats," announced the principal to his astonished hearers. "As yet it is impossible to say whether the miscreant was a boy or a girl

pupil. Whoever did this rascally thing knows that he is guilty."

The principal paused impressively, looking around the room so adroitly that each boy and girl present fancied that he—or she—had come in for most of Old Dut's attention.

"Does the offender wish to confess?" queried the principal. "If so, let the offender rise. In any case let every one be sure that we shall know the culprit by name, and by a new and bad reputation, by the time that this investigation is finished. For I warn you that I shall not rest until I have solved this most unexpected and unwelcome mystery."

Several of the girls who held up slashed, wrecked hats looked on the verge of tears. Laura Bentley, the doctor's pretty daughter, stood biting her lips in the effort to keep back the tears, for the new hat that was now such a wreck had been, an hour or two before, the prettiest piece of headgear that that young lady had ever owned.

"Let the culprit rise!" thundered Old Dut. "It won't be worth the young rascal's while to try to hide his guilt!"

Still no one rose, though several boys, each of whom knew himself to be wholly innocent, turned fiery red under the principal's accusing glare.

"Come, come, come!" admonished Old Dut. "Don't have any idea, Mr. Offender—or Miss Offender—that you can escape. Within the hour you will surely be found out!"

Several more innocent boys writhed and reddened as the principal's accusing glance roved the room. Mattie Wyman, whose parents were so poor that she rarely had anything approaching a new hat, turned deathly pale under the impression that she would be suspected of having acted through envious jealousy.

"This piece of villainy," continued Old Dut, "was perpetrated at some time between the opening of the morning session and the beginning of the forenoon recess. On my desk I have the usual list of pupils who asked and received permission to leave the room. No girl's name appears on this list, so I will, for the present, dismiss the girls as possible culprits and look over the young men. The boys who received permission to leave the room this forenoon were——"

Old Dut picked up a pad, and from it read the names:

"Ginley, Bateman, Dutcher, Prescott, Hazelton, Alvord, Ross, Henderson, Allen, Potter."

Again the principal paused, but this time his glance seemed to travel only to the boys whose names had just been read.

"Does any young man whose name I have just read wish to confess?"

There was no answer. Laura Bentley, in the meantime, tiring of holding up her wrecked hat to the gaze of the school, returned to the girls' coatroom with her spoiled finery.

In an instant she was back again. She went straight to the principal.

"Mr. Jones," she announced, "in a dark corner of the coatroom I found what most likely is the very knife that was used in slashing our hats."

Old Dut seized the knife, holding it up before the class.

"To whom does this telltale piece of property belong?" he called.

Dick Prescott's right hand slid down to his trousers' pocket. His heart seemed to stop beating, then gave a violent jump as he rose to his feet.

"Is this yours, Master Prescott?" demanded Old Dut in a voice of bewildered amazement.

"I would like to look at it and see, sir," Prescott answered. "I find that my knife isn't in my pocket."

There was a gasp of astonishment as Dick went forward. Some there were in the room who knew him to be incapable of such mean work, but there were other pupils who were

ready enough to believe him guilty if the evidence pointed that way.

"Is—this—your—knife—Master Prescott?" demanded Old Dut most impressively.

Dick received the article with trembling fingers, looked it over, then replied, without a trace of hesitation:

"Yes, sir."

"You know it's your knife?" insisted the principal.

"Yes, sir; I recognize it by some of the marks on the handle."

"Then, young man, how do you account for the knife being found in the girls' coatroom?"

"I don't account for it, sir," Dick replied in a voice that now quivered a little. "I can't."

"How long has the knife been out of your possession?"

"Until just now, sir, I didn't know that it had been out of my possession at all."

"You thought you had put it back in your pocket safely, after the finish of the work, did you?" shot out Old Dut sharply.

Dick's face took on a deathly pallor.

"I can't believe, sir," he answered, with a sharp indrawing of his breath, "that you believe me guilty of anything like this mean work."

It was like a blow between the eyes to the principal. Old Dut didn't believe him guilty,

but here was accusing evidence, and the principal was much too good a schoolmaster to show any favoritism.

"I don't want to believe that you would do a thing like this, Master Prescott. Therefore I offer you every chance to clear yourself from suspicion. I am ready, and the class is ready, to listen to anything that you have to say on the subject."

Laura Bentley's face had turned whiter than Dick's. The girl herself did not believe young Prescott to be guilty, and she would have done anything in her power to establish his innocence. She was even tempted to repent having brought the knife under the principal's eye.

"I am listening, Master Prescott, for anything that you may have to say!" sounded the voice of the schoolroom judge.

"And I wish, sir, that I could think of something to say," returned Dick. "All I can say, sir, is that I have not been in the girls' coatroom at any time this year, and that I know absolutely nothing about this outrage."

"That will do for the moment, then, Master Prescott. You may slip the knife into your pocket. No; on second thought, I will keep it for the present, until this matter has been cleared up. You may go to your seat now. Master Alvord will come to the platform and act as

monitor. Master Alvord, I charge you, especially, to see to it that there is no whispering or passing of notes."

From a drawer in his desk Old Dut took a pocket flash lamp. Then he passed on out into the girls' coatroom. For some time he was out there, while the class waited with drawn breath. Perhaps the principal, wise in all the moods of juvenile thought, remained away longer than was necessary. When he did come back Old Dut returned to his desk, releasing Alvord with politely expressed thanks. Then the principal seated himself.

"Master Prescott will step forward."

The schoolroom judge held out to the boy a scrap of paper.

"I found this in the coatroom, Master Prescott. On it are scrawled some figures and a few written words. It is a torn fragment, evidently, from a sheet on which to-day's examples in arithmetic had been prepared. Are these figures, these words, in your handwriting?"

Again Dick's hand shook as he took the piece of paper.

"These are my figures; this is my writing," Dick admitted in a very low voice.

"You are certain of it? There can be no mistake?"

"There is no mistake, sir, unless some one else

in this school makes his figures and his letters just as I do."

Then silence fell over the room. It was an awesome silence. To many of the hearers of what had just passed, Dick Prescott had confessed his guilt.

Many of the girls who had suffered in property at the hands of the slasher now glared scornfully at Dick. Though the boy at the platform did not see their glances, he felt them burn at his back.

Laura Bentley's eyes were wet with tears that she tried hastily to wipe away. She did not believe Dick guilty, any more than her father did when the doctor heard of the matter later.

"Now, Master Prescott," continued the principal's incisive voice, "do some hard thinking."

"You may be very sure that I am doing it, sir," came the low reply.

Then the clock ticked, for the boys and girls looking on all but forgot to breathe. All of these youngsters were familiar with the trial of Major André, as studied in their history class. But to them the present occasion seemed more thrilling, more tragic. Dick Prescott's life was not at stake, but at least his reputation as a decent fellow was.

At last Old Dut broke the silence.

"Have you been thinking hard, Master Prescott?"

"Yes, sir; but to no purpose."

"Meaning that you are unable to frame an answer that shall be convincing enough?"

"I mean, sir, that I am not in any way able to account for the finding of either my knife or the piece of paper in the girls' coatroom."

"Then you still intend to insist upon your innocence?"

Dick's voice rose suddenly loud and clear as he replied, with thrilling earnestness:

"I shall insist, sir, that I am innocent as long as I have breath left for speech!"

Dave Darrin brought the palms of his hands together in instant applause. Tom Reade followed, instantly, and Dick's other chums and some friends followed suit. Hisses started a moment later.

"Silence and order here!" rapped Old Dut sharply. "This is no theater!"

"Maybe it isn't," muttered Tom Reade under his breath. "But if the real villain shows his head we'll surely mob him!"

Then the clock ticked on. Old Dut, looking outwardly very wise, wondered inwardly what his duty really was.

CHAPTER XXII

LIGHT ON A DARK MATTER

ONE of the under teachers came to the principal's classroom to remark that recess had already lasted fifty minutes. Old Dut pressed the button to ring the yard gong, then turned back to his class.

"This matter will be investigated to the very bottom," he observed. "We will now go on with our daily work."

At noon all the parents who had sons or daughters in the eighth grade at the Central Grammar heard about the outrage.

Naturally, Dick's parents were indignant at the accusation.

"My boy," remarked his father, "I am not going to insult you by asking you whether you did such an outrageous thing."

"But what is bothering me, sir," Dick answered, "is how to clear myself of the suspicion. It all looks very black against me."

"Those who know you best," said his mother, "will never be satisfied that you could do such a wicked thing."

"But I am afraid there are a good many who will believe it all," Dick murmured mournfully.

"Really, how can you blame people for suspecting me?"

"Strangers are not to be blamed for their suspicion of you," replied Mr. Prescott. "Those who know you can't be convinced that you would do such a thing. The scoundrel, whoever he is, must feel ashamed of himself by this time."

"But the knife and the portion of the exercise paper?" inquired Mrs. Prescott. "These incidents make it certain that a deliberate attempt was made to fasten the deed on our son."

"These things often bring their own detection and adjustment," went on Mr. Prescott. "We will be patient for a day or two. By that time, if the matter be not cleared up to our entire satisfaction, I am prepared to spend every penny we have in bringing on an investigation that shall show who the real culprit is."

* * * * *

Laura Bentley, too, discussed this one topic all through the noon meal with her parents.

"That deed doesn't sound at all like young Prescott," said the doctor with emphasis. "Prescott may be hasty and impulsive, but he's no more a sneak than I'm an Indian chief."

"I'm certain that Dick didn't do it," Laura went on. "For one thing, even if he were mean enough, he'd be too clever to leave his knife behind to bring suspicion upon himself."

"To my mind," continued Dr. Bentley, "the knife and the scrap of paper show that they were left in the coatroom as part of a deliberate plan to injure young Prescott. Find out who his enemies are, and you'll be able to walk straight up to the real offenders. Depend upon that."

All the way back to school Laura was busily engaged in thinking. Indeed, her mind dwelt upon the affair so much all through the afternoon that her studies suffered sadly in consequence.

Just before the close of the afternoon session Laura picked up a pencil and wrote a note. Then she raised her hand.

"Miss Bentley?" inquired the principal.

"I wish permission, sir, to pass a note."

"Is it important?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good."

Embarrassed by the realization that all the pupils were watching her covertly, Laura rose, came forward, crossed the room, then turned up Dick's aisle and laid the note on his desk. This done, she returned to her own seat.

Dick read:

"I want to see you after school about this morning's affair. I know you didn't do it."

Dick looked up gratefully, nodded to Laura, then placed the note in his pocket.

As soon as school was out Dick's chums gathered about him.

"Suppose you run out to Norton's woods?" proposed Dick. "Laura Bentley wants to speak with me."

"Is it private, or may I stay with you?" queried Greg, who guessed that it was something in relation to the day's sensation.

"You may stay, Holmesy, but I think the rest had better run on out to the woods."

Dave started off with three of the fellows. Dick and Greg were detained only a moment, for Laura came hastening outside.

"Ben Alvord! Henry Dutcher!" called Miss Bentley.

That hang-dog pair of boys turned in a good deal of astonishment.

"Come here, please," Laura continued. "I want to speak with you a moment."

Both boys so addressed, feeling highly uneasy, would have preferred to bolt, but Laura's tone was compelling. So they came toward her.

"Whatcher want?" Hen inquired, with a swaggering attempt to appear unconcerned. Dick and Greg stood looking on in silence.

"Boys," began Laura, looking straight at Hen and Ben, "what were you two doing in the drug store with Fred Ripley and Bert Dodge?"

Ben opened his mouth to deny, but Laura's

glance was so steady and resolute that Hen judged it would make matters worse to deny. So he admitted:

"They invited us in to have some ice cream soda."

"Anything wrong about that?" Ben demanded doggedly.

"Seemingly not," Laura went on. "Yet, as my mother and I passed out by the alcove in which you were seated, we saw Bert Dodge hand you each a greenback."

"You never!" burst angrily from Ben Alvord.

"Careful, there, Ben," Dick warned him, his eyes flashing. "It isn't manly to call a young lady a liar."

"I'm not," Ben replied confusedly, "but I ought to know what happened, when I was one of the party."

"I saw you each take a piece of paper money from Bert Dodge," Laura insisted. "My mother saw it also. You all had your heads very close together when mother and I passed your booth. Were you plotting mischief?"

"No," answered both boys in the same breath.

"Dick," asked Laura, turning to him, "did either of these boys have a chance to take your knife this morning?"

"Why, yes!" cried Dick suddenly, his face lighting up eagerly. He brought a glass alley

from his pocket. "You see this?" he went on. "Well, just before we came in from the coat-room, when school started this morning, Alvord came up to me and whispered that he had found a marble of mine. He said he'd put it in my pocket, and he did. Ben, you hound," continued young Prescott, turning upon the other boy, "in that moment you slipped my knife out of my pocket."

"You're a li——" began Ben, his face turning deathly pale.

"I can take up that question with you at any time, when there isn't a girl around," Dick continued steadily. "But now I know that you two received money from Dodge and Ripley. What would they pay you for? And I also know, now, when you got my knife. And that is how you got a piece of my exercise paper. Ben Alvord, you and Hen Dutcher are the rascals who slashed the girls' hats!"

"It's a sure thing!" uttered Greg Holmes in a voice that sounded like a cheer.

"Nothing like it!" choked Ben. "It's a put-up job to save yourself, Dick Prescott. But you won't be able to put it over, even with a girl's help. Come along, Hen."

"Don't you dare to think of leaving until we are through with you!" ordered Dick, with a sidelong glance at Greg.

"I don't believe I can help you any more now, can I?" Laura asked.

"No; but I thank you a thousand times for the help that you have given me," Prescott answered. "Some day I hope I may be able to repay you."

Laura walked away rapidly. The school yard was now deserted.

Dick turned to gaze wonderingly at Alvord.

"Ben," he said slowly, "I never before believed that a boy could be quite as mean as you have been."

"I didn't have anything to do with it," asserted Alvord.

"I had forgotten that brief moment when you had your hand in my pocket this morning," Dick went on. "But now I know that you stole my knife, and that either you slashed the girls' hats, or else you knew all about it."

"You're a li——" began Alvord, flushing hot.

Dick took a swift step, landing before him.

"Don't you hit me!" cowered the other boy.

"I don't want to," Prescott muttered quickly. "I'm too fond of keeping my hands clean. But you've simply got to come along with me."

"Where?"

"Back to the schoolroom. You've got to talk with the principal."

"I won't go," cried Ben, turning pale.

"Then I'm afraid I shan't be able to keep my hands clean, after all. You've got to go with me and face the principal, even if I have to grab you and drag you there. Greg! Don't let that Dutcher fellow get away!"

For Hen, at mention of the dread Old Dut, was beginning to edge away. Holmes, however, caught him by the arm.

"Leggo of me!" howled Hen.

"All right," nodded Greg, releasing Hen's arm. "But the instant that you try to get away you'll find me after you, and fighting mad!"

"I'm not a-going to trot up to Old Dut," insisted Hen.

"Dick says you are," Greg answered.

"And now is the time," added Prescott. "Come along. If you two have done nothing wrong, then you've no need to be afraid of the principal. I'm not. Come!"

Alvord and Dutcher would still have turned and darted away, had they not been certain that any attempt to escape would result only in their being roughly handled. Ben and Hen were somewhat larger than Dick and his chum, with the difference, however, that the larger pair were naturally cowards.

"You'll be mighty sorry for this," blustered Dutcher.

"So will you, I'm thinking," Dick retorted.

"But there's no use in our talking until we stand before the principal. This way!"

Dick entered the school building, Greg bringing up the rear to make sure that neither scamp had a chance to make a sudden bolt to freedom.

As they entered their classroom, Old Dut, his hat on, was just engaged in locking his desk.

"What's wanted?" he inquired in surprise.

"We've returned to tell you some things that we've learned, sir," Dick replied.

"About this forenoon's affair?" inquired the principal, with instant comprehension.

"Yes, sir."

"Go ahead."

Dick repeated the information that Laura had given, and related, also, the incident of Ben thrusting a hand into his pocket in the coatroom before the opening of the morning session.

"What have you to say to all of this, Alvord?" inquired Old Dut.

"It isn't true, sir."

"None of it?"

"Not a word, sir."

"Not a word of it?" pressed the principal.

"Not a single word, sir," insisted Ben nervously, while Hen Dutcher fidgeted noticeably.

"Then neither Dodge or Ripley handed you any money in the drug store?"

"No, sir," lied Ben desperately.

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"And this denial of yours is as true as any other part of your denial, is it, Master Alvord."

It took Ben a few moments to get the nature of the question through his head. When he did understand he lied plumply:

"Yes, sir."

"The passing of money in the drug store is a matter very easy to prove or disprove," declared Old Dut. "I can see Mrs. Bentley and her daughter and ask them about it. If they both state that you did receive money, then I shall be compelled to believe that you have lied to me all the way through."

Too late Ben Alvord saw the trap into which he had stepped, and wished that he had admitted receiving the money, inventing some lie to account for it.

"Masters Prescott and Holmes," continued the principal, "I will ask you to step down into the yard, and wait for me. Masters Alvord and Dutcher, you will remain here with me."

"Hurrah!" breathed Greg Holmes jubilantly, as he and his chum reached the yard. "Now the whole matter is straight. Neither Alvord nor Dutcher can crawl out of the hole now."

"We'll hope not," said Dick slowly. "But you know now, Greg, what a talented pair of liars those two boys are. They may yet find a way to lie out of their scrape."

CHAPTER XXIII

"I'M NO FRIEND OF PRESCOTT'S!"

"W E'LL see," murmured Greg skeptically.

Fully fifteen minutes passed before Alvord and Dutcher appeared on one of the porches of the school building.

Both were hanging their heads low, as though in shame, and it was also very plain that both had been blubbing.

"It's all off for them, I guess," chuckled Greg.

At that moment Old Dut appeared behind the boys on the porch. The principal spoke a few low-toned words to the pair, who slunk away. Old Dut, after locking the door and placing the key in his pocket, stepped over to Greg and Dick.

"That was good work, young men, and I compliment you," said the principal, as he joined the boys. "I shall also thank Laura Bentley in the morning. The whole affair is now cleared up."

"Then Alvord and Dutcher confessed, sir?" asked Dick eagerly.

"They tried to deny, but I pinned them down

so closely that they finally admitted it. They were crying, too, at the end, and begging for mercy. But I suspended them; the rest will be up to the Board of Education."

"I'm sorry for them," murmured Dick, "but I am thankful that it is all over. It is a fearful feeling when one is unjustly under such a suspicion."

"I didn't really suspect you," replied Old Dut. "Still, in my public position, I can show no favoritism. What I am most provoked about is that such fellows as Ripley and Dodge will probably escape their just share of the consequences."

"Will they escape, sir?" Greg asked.

"I fear so," Old Dut answered. "Both Dodge and Ripley will undoubtedly deny that they gave money to Alvord and Dutcher for any other reasons than sheer good nature. The only valuable witnesses against them would be Alvord and Dutcher, and no one attaches much importance to the statements of boys who are self-confessed liars."

"Then Dodge and Ripley will go free of punishment?" demanded Greg.

"That is the probability, Master Holmes."

"They won't either one of them escape answering my questions, though," Dick uttered grimly. "I shall find Dodge and Ripley as soon

as I can, and I shall find some way to make them talk, whether they want to or not."

"I hope you have success, Master Prescott," said the principal warmly. "Well, here our roads separate. I will wish you good afternoon."

"Where are you going?" Greg inquired, as Dick set a rapid pace.

"Through the streets, to see if I can find any one who has seen Dodge this afternoon. I believe that he is far more guilty, in this case, than Fred Ripley."

Within ten minutes Dick had gathered, from a small boy, that Bert Dodge had been seen going in the direction of Norton's woods. But Bert was alone, so their informant said.

"Come on, Greg," urged Dick. "We want to catch Bert Dodge as quickly as it can be done."

Moving at a jog, within another ten minutes the two had the fortune to sight the young man they sought. He was down the road, walking, just past the beginning of the woods.

"Put on a little more steam," Prescott urged.

Bert must have been absorbed in his own thoughts, for he did not hear the other boys coming until they were within a hundred feet of him. Then Dodge turned, recognizing the other boys with a start.

"Hold on, Dodge!" Dick called. "We want to talk with you."

"That's more than I want with you," snapped Bert.

"It makes very little difference," Dick rejoined easily. "We're here and we're going to talk. Dodge, why were you such a hound as to pay Alvord and Dutcher to put up a mean trick against me?"

"Easy answer," sneered Bert. "I didn't."

"Oh, yes, you did," insisted Greg angrily. "Dick Prescott is in a position to prove it, too."

"How?" leered Bert.

"Alvord and Dutcher have just confessed the whole thing to Principal Jones," Greg retorted. "They've been suspended, and, before they can get back into school, they'll have to go before the Board of Education and tell the whole yarn to them."

Bert turned quite pale, though he managed to keep his composure.

"You're lying," he sneered.

"Oh, no; we're not," Dick answered with spirit. "Principal Jones knows all about the business, even how you passed the money to Alvord and Dutcher in the drug store."

"He knows more than I do, then," laughed Bert uneasily.

"Why?" demanded Dick, opening his eyes

very wide. "Do you deny that you handed money to Ben and Hen in the drug store?"

"Of course I deny it," protested Bert. "And I'll continue to deny it as long as I have breath left in my body."

"That's fine, then," chuckled Dick grimly. "For Mr. Jones has positive proof that you gave money to Ben and Hen."

"He has the word of that pair, I suppose," laughed Bert Dodge scornfully. "Who would believe a pair of boys like that, who are always lying?"

"Just as it happens," Dick retorted, "Mr. Jones has also the word of people whom any body of men will believe. The passing of money was witnessed by outsiders."

At this statement Bert's jaw dropped visibly. For a moment he seemed on the point of breaking down. Then he pulled himself together again, remarking:

"Oh, well, we'll see about all that when the time comes—if it ever does. And now I'm going to leave you. I don't want people to see you fellows with me. They might think you were friends of mine."

"I hope not!" muttered Greg fervently. "Dick, are you going to tarry long enough to rub this cur's nose in the dust?"

"I am not," Prescott answered. "He's fal-

len so low in my opinion that I'd hate myself for hitting him, unless it were necessary, just as one has to defend one's self against a mad dog."

"Don't try to get too funny with me," glared Bert, clenching his fists.

"I'll try not to," Dick retorted. "The truth is, I don't want to have anything of any sort to do with you after this. Come along, Greg. This rascal knows our opinion of him."

. Away walked the two Grammar School boys, keeping on down the road in search of Dave Darin and the others, who might be somewhere in this neighborhood.

"Dick Prescott, if you had been alone you wouldn't have talked to me in that fashion," muttered Bert in an undertone. "But there was no use in hitting you, this time, for Holmes would have sailed into me, too. I'll get you alone, Prescott, and make you eat your words yet."

As soon as the chums were out of sight, Bert, feeling rather weak, sank down on the grass at the edge of the woods. After his first burst of anger the young man felt dizzy and weak.

"Blazes! If this matter is fought out before the Board of Education, Fred and I may find ourselves in a pretty sort of row!" he gasped. "I must see Fred before supper. I must have this all talked over with him, and he and I must

know just where we are to stand when we are questioned. That's the worst of hiring muckers like Alvord and Dutcher. Such low-down fellows will always 'squeal' when they're pushed into a corner."

As he sat there, reflecting, Bert was wholly unconscious of the fact that something living was creeping through the bushes toward him. But at last a rustling in the bushes just behind him made the young man start and turn about.

What he beheld gave Dodge one of the big frights of a life time.

A ragged, thick-set man, with a red, brutish face, was almost upon him. The fellow's eyes looked bloodshot with hate. In his right hand he grasped a stout club.

"What on earth are you doing here?" demanded Bert, leaping to his feet and quaking. "What do you want?"

"Not you," replied the fellow, also rising to his feet. "I thought I heard another voice here."

"Dick Prescott's?" demanded Dodge.

The man nodded.

"It's the fellow they call Tim," thought Bert rapidly. "He's the mate of the man they have in custody—the fellow Bink. It can't be any other."

"Prescott was just here," Dodge went on

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swiftly. "He and another fellow named Greg Holmes."

"Which way did they go?" demanded Tim, for it was he.

"Down that way," replied Dodge, pointing in the direction taken by the two Grammar School boys.

"Thank you," muttered Tim, and started in the opposite direction.

"Here," called Bert, running after the man. "I told you they went in the opposite direction."

"I know you did," leered the brute.

"Then don't you want to find them?"

"Yes; that's why I'm taking the other direction. You wouldn't tell me straight about your friends."

"Friends?" repeated Bert incredulously. Then he drew himself up very erect, as he replied haughtily:

"My man, you can take my word for it. I am no friend of Dick Prescott's."

Both his tone and the look in his eyes convinced Tim.

"All right, then," he nodded. "I'll go in the other direction."

"Hurry, and it won't take you two minutes to catch 'em," urged Bert.

"Thank ye kindly, mate."

Bert did not even wince at this familiarity.

He watched Tim steal along on the grass and slip out of sight.

"Now, I'll take the other course and get home as quickly as I can," shivered Bert, moving rapidly. Then he halted, for an instant, a cold chill shaking him.

"Oh, nonsense!" Bert remonstrated with himself. "The fellow won't do anything too dangerous to the pair. He'll just warm them up a little with that switch of his. I don't know a fellow in the world who needs a hard switching more than that same Dick Prescott does."

So, too, thought Tim, from the elaborate pains that he took in pursuit. Not once did his foot touch gravel during the short chase. Moving on the grass at the edge of the road Tim's feet made no sound. He soon sighted ahead the boys he sought. Dick and Greg were talking too absorbedly to realize that they were being pursued.

Nor did they know until a broad hand fell upon Dick, hurling him to the ground.

Then the same hand settled upon Greg Holmes, hurling him down at the side of his chum.

"Now I can say and do what I want to!" snarled Tim, dancing over to them and brandishing his club.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

“YOU’VE kept the police hounding me, but now I can have my innings!”
Tim went on gruffly.

Dick tried to roll over out of the way of that swinging club.

“Here, don’t you try to crawl out, or I’ll stop your wandering,” Tim warned him, and Prescott sat up again.

“You’ve kept the police hounding me day and night,” Tim went on.

“Some mistake there,” Dick informed him. “You’ve made the wrong guess. I’m not the chief of police.”

“No; but you’ve kept them posted about me, and chasing me,” the brute continued. “You broke up my ghost-show, just when I was ready to make some money out of it. You’ve kept the police moving after me ever since. I’ve been dodging them day and night!”

“At all events they didn’t seem able to find you,” jeered Prescott.

“That wasn’t your fault,” snarled Tim.

The plain truth was that Tim had been suffering from an overdose of imagination. Since

what he described as the breaking up of his ghost-show Tim had imagined that every man he saw was a plain-clothes policeman in search of him. But the fact that Tim had been suffering from a delusion only did not lessen his resentment any.

"Those policemen will get me yet," Tim continued, pausing before the two seated boys and glaring down at them ferociously. "I know I can't escape. I won't care much, either, now that I've met with you two hoodoo boys. When I'm through getting square with you, I'll be ready to go and take my medicine with Bink, like a man."

"After you get through getting square with us?" repeated Greg.

"Yes; do you know what I'm going to do with you?" demanded Tim, crouching forward, holding his club poised and glaring into Greg's eyes.

Young Holmes did not answer. It is no reflection on his bravery to state that, at this moment, his courage was well-nigh paralyzed.

For another reason Dick did not speak. His attention was centered on the ground just back of Tim.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you two?" again demanded the brute, giving an extra flourish to the club.

"Nothing," dryly broke in Dave Darrin from behind. At the same instant Dave, having whipped off his coat, bounded upon Tim from behind, folding the coat over the fellow's head and holding it there with a desperate and determined grip.

"You're going to do nothing—just nothing!" cheerily declared Tom Reade, as he also leaped upon Tim from behind, and, with Dave's aid, jerked the man over on to his back.

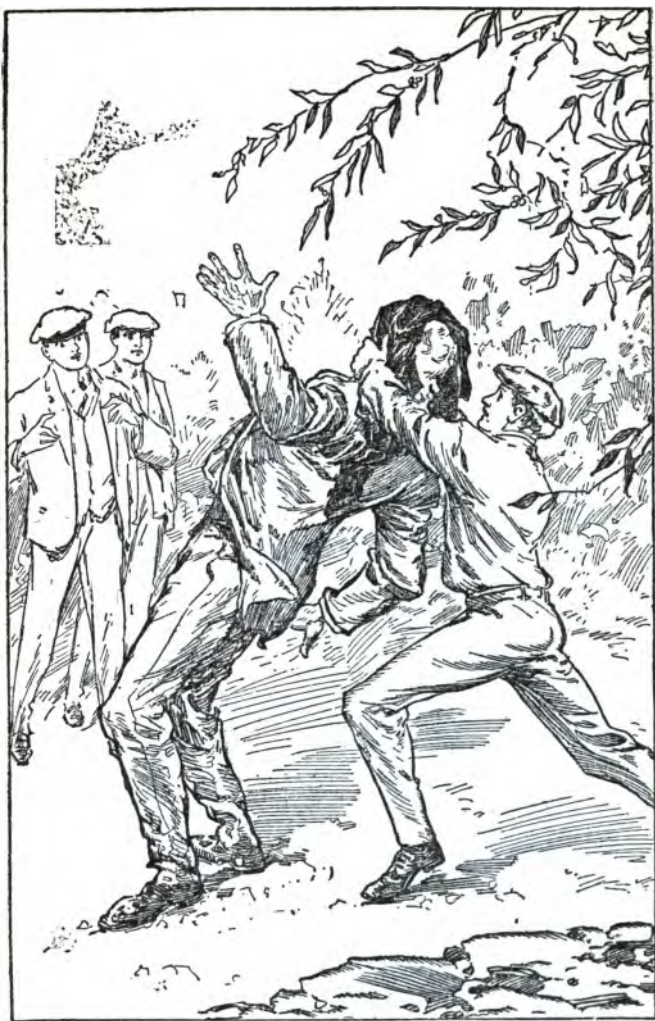
Tim cursed, fighting savagely. But Dave, holding on relentlessly, succeeded in keeping the coat wrapped about Tim's head. A blindfolded man always puts up a poor fight.

Dan and Harry hurled themselves upon the body of their prostrate, unseeing foe. Tom wrenched the club from Tim's hands and gave him two not very gentle blows over the shins. Nor were Dick and Greg long in leaping into the conflict.

They were only fourteen-year-old boys, and they had a man of unusual strength to conquer.

But Dave had started it right, by blindfolding their common foe. Now, as Tim floundered and fought in his efforts to dislodge the coat from his head, the boys succeeded in rolling him face downward.

"Now, lie still," commanded Tom, giving the man a tap on the head, "if you don't want to



Dave Folded His Coat Over Tim's Head.

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get a dose of fever and nightmare from your own club."

"You let me up," roared Tim, "and I'll show you."

"You stay where you are, and we'll show you," mocked Dave Darrin.

"Fellows, who has some cord?" called Dick.

"I have a top string," suggested Hazelton.

"Is it strong?" questioned Dick.

"It's the strongest I have, anyway," replied Harry, passing over the cord.

It proved to be tough, even if fine.

Dick rapidly made a secure slipnoose at one end of the string. This noose he succeeded in catching over one of Tim's wrists.

"Now, Tom," called Prescott, "I'm going to tie our gentleman's hands behind him. If he makes any fuss, or won't take orders, give him a headache with that stick. Remember, that he has a hard head and lay it on accordingly. If you have to crack his skull it will save the state a lot of expense."

This seemingly blood-thirsty advice Dick accompanied with three or four winks which Reade understood.

"I don't care much about the state," Tom retorted. "But I'm not going to take any chances with the fellow. Do you hear me, Tim? If you don't do just what Prescott tells you to I'm

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going to do a job on your head that'll call for a lot of bone-grafting to make your head anything like whole again."

"Put your hands behind you, Tim," Dick ordered.

Through the enveloping coat came a volley of bad language. Tom, at a sign from Dick, struck the fellow a light tap over the head. Then Tim decided that it would be wisest to obey. He placed his hands behind him, resting on his back, and in a short time Prescott had done the most workmanlike job of tying that was possible.

"He won't get his hands out of that in a hurry," Dick remarked. "Take away the coat and turn him over on to his back, fellows."

When turned, Tim lay glaring up at his gleeful young captors.

"If this gentleman hadn't made so much noise," mocked Darrin, "we wouldn't have known what was going on. We were away over there, beyond the trees, resting on the grass, when we heard Tim braying. He has himself to thank for being in trouble."

"What are we going to do with our white elephant?" Tom wanted to know.

"Take him back with us to Gridley," Dick announced.

"Oh, now, see here, younkers, don't rub it in," begged Tim huskily. "When you all

jumped on me didn't I act like a gentleman, and make things easy for you? One good turn deserves another, you know, boys. Lemme go. I'll get out for good, this time."

"You'll have to ask the police department of Gridley for that permission," Dick informed him coolly.

"What?" fairly screamed Tim. "Oh, now, boys, be good-natured for once in your lives. You youngers are fond of roving through the woods. So am I. It's life to me. I'd die, locked up in prison after the free life I've led. Lemme go. I'll never bother you again—I swear I won't."

"It won't do, Tim; we've no right to let you go," Dick assured him. "We're schoolboys, and one of the things we learn in the class in civics is the duty of every boy to be a good citizen. Good citizens don't let men of your stamp go at large when it can be helped. Get him up on his feet, fellows. Bolster him up."

But Tim refused to stand, of his own will, or to advance when supported on his feet.

"Dan, you run after some men and a wagon, then," Dick advised. "Men will know just how to handle him."

However, Tim, when he heard this plan, suddenly consented to walk. Thus the boys led him down the road, out past the woods and so on

into town. But they turned their prisoner over to the first men they met, and these men promptly conducted Tim to the chief of police.

Both Tim and Bink pleaded guilty, when arraigned, and thus saved the county the bother of a long trial. For their attempt to get at the vault of the Second National Bank, each was sent to the penitentiary for a number of years.

To the last neither man would declare his true name. They stuck to "Tim" and "Bink" to the very end, for which reason the facetious clerk of the court entered their names on the records as "Timothy Doe" and "Binkleigh Roe."

Both men admitted, at the time of sentence, that they had once been workmen engaged in blasting work and bridge building. Strikes had thrown them out of work, and in the end they had decided to turn yeggmen. Their knowledge of handling explosives had made them determine upon safe-blowing.

"But there's nothing in it," Tim admitted to the judge. "Just about three months too late we've found out that the honest path is the only one that leads anywhere."

According to Tim's story, he and Bink, when the Grammar School boys had first encountered them in the woods, had been engaged in burying their safe-blowing outfit in a hiding place.

After Bink's wounding and capture, Tim had hung about, intent on finding some way to rescue his comrade. Tim wanted two things—a safe hiding place and some way of getting money to use in his plans for rescuing Bink.

So, having heard of the Haunted School, Tim had planned to use that old, lonely building as his headquarters. He had started a new "haunt," reasoning that no one would ever seek him in an abode of departed spirits.

After scaring away a large proportion of the usual passers by, Tim had planned to play the highwayman with the few who did pass, hoping thereby to raise some money. In firing the shot in that ghost-shooting trick, Tim had used his last cartridge; but in his highway work he had not expected to use his pistol to do more than frighten passers by. The bottle of red ink that Tim had used was one that he had found, dust-covered and cobweb-wrapped, on a high shelf in the old-time school building.

"It beats all the bull luck that some folks have," Bert Dodge afterward grumbled to Fred Ripley. "When I sent that rascal Tim down the road to find Prescott I figured that Prescott would get a jolly good beating. Instead, back comes Prescott with Tim a prisoner, and Prescott and his chums get a hero reputation all through the town."

"We've been moving in a maze of hard luck lately," Ripley admitted.

Within a fortnight after their suspension, Ben Alvord and Hen Dutcher were called before the Board of Education. Old Dut explained the nature of the boys' offense, and both youngsters were summarily expelled from the public schools of Gridley.

Within a very few days after that Alvord and Dutcher left Gridley, having found first employment elsewhere. We are not likely to encounter either Ben or Hen again.

Bert Dodge and Fred Ripley were also before the Board of Education on that same night. Bert and Fred, however, had constructed a very plausible account of how they had offered Alvord and Dutcher money to pay the expenses of a harmless practical joke against Dick Prescott.

"Then how did these young men come to commit such a mean outrage?" demanded a member of the Board of Education.

"Alvord and Dutcher must have made their own plan, and a mean one, where Ripley and myself had intended only a humorous piece of mischief," Dodge replied readily.

Lawyer Ripley presented the case for his son and the latter's friend. Hence Dodge and Ripley both escaped punishment. Yet such escapes

are only seeming ones. Liars and cheats never flourish. Fred and Bert were jubilant over the avoidance of consequences; neither of them possessed the sense or the experience to know that a rogue never escapes, for a long time, the consequences of his wickedness.

Dick & Co., however, were now on the top wave of deserved popularity at the Central Grammar School. They were the acknowledged leaders of all the boys under the sway of Old Dut.

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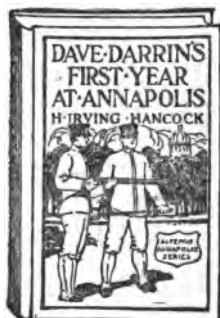
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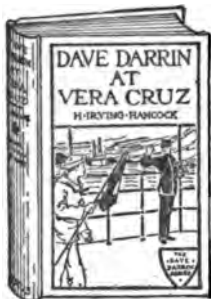


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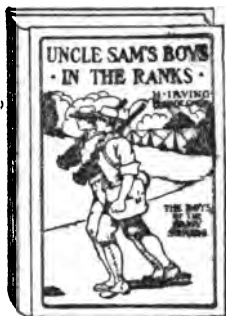
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6. **UNCLE SAM'S BOYS AS LIEUTENANTS**; or, Serving Old Glory as Line Officers.
7. **UNCLE SAM'S BOYS WITH PERSHING**; or, Dick Prescott at Grips with the Boche.
8. **UNCLE SAM'S BOYS SMASH THE GERMANS**; or, Helping the Allies Wind Up the Great World War.